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# Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects: Voice, Sexuality and Subversion in African Women's Writing

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Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects: Voice, Sexuality  
and Subversion in African Women's Writing

by

Sarah Namulondo

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Dedication

In loving memory of my mother

Christine Namiro Ssemasaazi

Thanks for leading me onto this path at the tender age of three

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Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects: Voice, Sexuality  
and Subversion in African Women's Writing

Sarah Namulondo

ABSTRACT

The privileging of man in African societies has involved an erasure of identities and subjectivities of many women, holding them to an assumption of female inferiority. To counter the injustice, African women writers have engaged in rhetorical and performative strategies designed to reconstitute the cultural erasure as they try to claim status as individuals. But in the process, various cultural expectations such as their maternal roles act as constant bottlenecks to return them back to their prescribed roles as subordinate beings. This dissertation, "Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects: Voice, Sexuality and Subversion in African Women's Writing" explores the methodologies of cultural resistance and the complex ways in which African women have articulated their subjectivity, challenged societal roles, negotiated tradition and formulated a literary and feminist aesthetic. As inventors invested in creating narratives that speak to the concerns of an African female aesthetic, these authors work in, through and toward what Gloria Anzaldua calls a "mestiza consciousness," whose work is to "break down the subject-object duality that keeps her [woman] a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (102).

Embracing the framework of African Feminism or what Obioma Nnaemeka calls “Nego Feminism,” each chapter articulates the sites of enunciation in which the characters engage with their fragmented conditions. Though with differing methodologies, for each writer, the act of seeking a space through which a self with an “outline” is negotiated and articulated allows the women to become aware of the need to speak their own truths and realities. I examine how authors like Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Yvonne Vera and Calixthe Beyala construct textual strategies that go beyond the marginalized figures and articulate themselves so that they escape society’s sanctioned external definitions. My dissertation proffers a fresh insight that goes beyond the descriptions of how women are represented, superseding this kind of criticism with more complex analysis of gender and women’s oppression.

## Introduction

French feminist and theorist He'le'ne Cixous claims that in order for women to develop self-affirming forms of discourse, they must write through their bodies and give voice to female sexuality. She notes that they must not get trapped in male identified languages and grammar that reduce them to objects of production and reproduction. "Write your self," she tells her readers in "The Laugh of the Medusa". "Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (250). Cixous associates these "immense resources" with new forms of possibilities in form of metaphors and symbols that would eventually liberate the women. She believes that the development of a feminine identified language would break the symbolic order that is signified by the phallus by challenging the existing binary structure of presence/absence, speech/silence and male/female.

However, in most African communities, the challenge goes beyond the task of writing one's self. In thinking about fictions written in Africa by women, I'm particularly interested in the relationship between female self-identity and how it is manifested in the power structure of selected African societies. If "identity" refers in part to the ideas and feelings an individual has about herself, what happens in African communities, where women have, as part of their identity, a view that they are second class citizens, a view perpetuated by the patriarchal and colonial legacy? For centuries, both the patriarchal and colonial machineries have relegated the women to a private sphere where they have been held to cultural beliefs that subject them to an idealized domestic life. These cultural

verities emphasized a women's sphere in which they were the invisible supporters of the public life, expected to care for and reproduce society. The consequence was that women's bodies were erased and only male bodies existed. This dissertation focuses on the means and methods that African women writers have engaged to contest the subordination and erasure of the African woman from an embodied realm.

Nwanko Chimalum suggests in "African Literature and the Woman" that in order to contest the dominant rituals and patriarchal structures that control women's lives, "better imaginaries are needed in the African scene" (195). The sentiment is echoed by Carol Boyce Davies who reminds us that the formation of an African woman writer's female aesthetic demands "new examinations into the principles of composition, thought and expression of African women writers" (14). This means that the politics of female identity can only be tackled when the writer engages in creative ways with a new imagined reality that refuses to fit into fixed dichotomous structures and the implications of these structures. Zeroing in on a few cultural sites the women create, I explore the methodologies of cultural resistance and the characteristics of the "spaces" they invent. As inventors interested in creating narratives that speak to the concerns of an African female aesthetic, these authors work in, through and toward what Gloria Anzaldua calls a "mestiza consciousness," whose work is to "break down the subject-object duality that keeps her [woman] a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended" (*Borderlands* 102). The task of imagining new ways of representation then becomes all the more pressing to carve out the discursive spaces where the women can begin to speak from various complex vantage points of their own.

But as the writers move beyond the conscripting paradigms, it is important to

point out that the new realities they imagine for their characters aren't simply essentialist trappings that parallel the orders they are negating. In fact, all they are doing is refusing to fall into the binaries of the master narratives, and instead undertaking what Davies aptly calls a "balancing act," where African feminists and writers deal specifically "with the concrete and literary realities of African women's lives" (13). For them to attempt an assault on gender, class, racial, power and other hierarchies embedded in their societies, they take into consideration their location which invariably conditions their access to spaces of expression and disseminations. In this way, they engage with methodologies that evolve out of their particular terrains. They engage with painting, writing, mythical inventions, bodies and their unique sexuality to discover the attitudes of self-inscription, creative restraint, and a celebratory involvement in their societal affairs. They locate in the mythic and secular archetypes of "woman" what appears to be a pragmatic female subject with a self-consciousness that "negotiates" for some space.

Certain aspects of the African cultural scene set the context for such a task. Before the mid 1960s, the number of female names that were part of the African literary canon was rather small. Those few women whose names are documented as having exercised their literary talents represent isolated and sporadic exceptions, and today, are not viewed as having helped to open the doors to the wide acceptance of women writers. But after the publication of both Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land: A Novel* and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* in 1966, the genealogy of writings by African women, now spanning some forty years, became rich, though still intermittent. This sporadic nature of African women's writing owes much to the underlying political, economic and institutional factors that have historically influenced the writing culture in Africa. In fact, women's

writing here cannot be separated from the larger history of the continent, a history determined by the cultural and political institutions that have informed most African societies since the pre-colonial times. While in pre-colonial Africa some women wielded power, particularly as goddesses or traditional healers, the colonial machinery undermined these traditional professions. For instance in Zimbabwe, women were restricted to the domestic sphere when the European powers took over because as Katrin Berndt writes, “they were taught that they had to stay at home to cook, to clean, to raise healthy Christian children, and that it was their duty to obey their husbands” (17).

Matters weren't helped when the pioneer literature on the continent portrayed women in very restricted roles. For instance in both Cyprien Ekwensi and Chinua Achebe's works (icons and pioneers of African writing), the women characters, albeit strong and morally pure, simply mind their domestic chores. In Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, the more independent and adventurous Jagua Nana is inspired to leave home, but only to end up a prostitute on the streets of Lagos. She is never depicted in action, only always preparing for action. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe portrays a powerful goddess, Chielo, whose work among her people proves largely vengeful. The women's virtues of innocence, and nurturance in the texts are promoted through the prescribed, conventional limits, and the women are always seen in relation to their men. The men on the other hand are presented in their 'normal' roles. Indeed as both Ama Ata Aidoo and Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi have pointed out, major male African writers such as Ekwensi, Achebe and Wole Soyinka idealize women, while limiting their roles. According to Abbenyi, African male writers portray women as “passive, as always prepared to do the bidding of their husbands and family, as having no status of their own and therefore completely

dependent on their husbands” (*Gender* 4). In a paper presented at the Second African Writers’ Conference held in Stockholm in 1986, Aidoo contests the relegation of the African woman to the domestic sphere where she is denied a chance to articulate her desires in the public arena:

It is definite that anything that had to do with African women was, of all vital pieces of information, the most unknown (or rather unsought), the most ignored of all concerns, the most unseen of all the visibles, and we might as well face it, of everything to do with humanity, the most despised. This had nothing to do with anything that African women did or failed to do. It had to do with the politics of sex and the politics of the wealthy of this earth who grabbed it and who held it. (156-57)

“Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects” then intends to seek out textual strategies that go beyond the marginalized figures and search for rhetorical and performative spaces that African women writers use to re-imagine women’s bodies and voices into their communities. The study looks at critical textual accounts that are cultural specific in order to establish subjective spaces, or sites of enunciation through which women imagine possibilities of change. Through an examination of six novels - *Efuru* (1966) by Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa; *So Long A Letter* (1979) by Senegalese writer Mariama Ba; *Without A Name* (1994), *Under the Tongue* (1996) and *Butterfly Burning* (1998) by Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera and *Your Name Shall be Tanga* (1988) by Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala - I argue that the African women writers employ the trope of imagining alternative realities to affirm an ontological status for women that is not provided for in the patriarchal orders of their societies.

My selection of authors emphasizes a diversity of experiences and disputes any assumption that all African women writers are similar and write in the same genre or mode. Just as a discussion of the various feminisms complicates understandings about feminist theory, so does the literature written by African women revise our understanding of African literary expression. Two of the authors – Flora Nwapa and Mariama Ba - are from the first generation of African writers who exploded onto the African literary scene by producing narratives that contested the depiction of the African woman in the largely male dominated field. I include them in order to revisit their fiction from the perspective of an African feminist discourse which seeks to reveal the complex negotiation between the self and social. Nwapa for instance was among the first generation of women to attend an elite college alongside men. But while she was granted equal education opportunities, she struggled to carve out an intellectual space for herself in the literary world. She particularly interests me because she grounds her work in a theory of female existence that has roots in a mythical imagination.

Yvonne Vera and Calixthe Beyala on the other hand, are relatively new writers and not much scholarly work has been undertaken on their works. In contrast to the older generation, the new writers have opened doors to new conversations about the complexity of the African woman's situation, generating both controversy and praise. Vera, from Zimbabwe, is concerned with the trauma that the female body suffers as a result of the ravages of a war-torn country. She focuses on incidents of extreme violence that can only be understood in the context of a wider cultural probing. As Liz Gunner notes, "In Yvonne Vera, the social world has broken down almost completely. Family, community, nation – all barely exist and, where they do, they are invariably sites of

unspeakable violence and betrayal” (3). Beyala from Cameroon looks at the disintegration of both body and mind as a result of the culturally designated ideals that determine the value of a woman through the demand for her body. She contests the designation of this body as speechless and a void that is simultaneously visible and invisible.

This study makes use of ideas and information from several cultural critics of both the Western and African philosophical orientation whose thoughts and concepts inform my analysis. Two of the thinkers whose discourse applies to the way I examine the marginal space that oppressed African women occupy are cultural studies and postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha with his concept of the “Third Space” and African feminist theorist Obioma Nnaemeka’s concept of “Nego Feminism.” I contend that the African female subjectivities and consciousness are realized by imagining realities that provide locations from which the repressive hold of patriarchal strictures and gender differences is broken, locations which, as Bhabha says, “initiate new signs of identity” (*Location 1*). According to Bhabha, the Third Space is an intervening space that permits the creation of new identities. It offers an insight into the complexities of people whose identities and lived experiences render visible the hierarchical positions in society.

Bhabha explains:

The move away from the singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject position of race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation – that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically

crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of origin and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation in the act of defining the idea of society itself. (*Location 1-2*)

Building on Bhabha’s theory, my analysis locates the Third Space as that ambivalent site that negotiates and articulates an individual construct that is separate from the national as well as society’s norms. Bhabha says that through a process of dialogue, a space of negotiation opens up, transforming the “meanings of colonial inheritance into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future” (38). In a preface to *Communicating in The Third Space*, Bhabha, cites the example of the *Gacaca*, a traditional mat, that allowed the victims of the Rwandan genocide to discuss, dispute, confess, apologize and negotiate so that both the “Tutsis and Hutus together confront the inequities and asymmetries of a social trauma not as ‘common people’ but as a people with a common cause” (x). Emma Perez in *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas into History*, also invokes the Third Space concept, articulating it as an “interstitial space” (5), an exterior, in-between space that reflects the tensions and reproduced silences of multiple conjectures within the context of confinement. It is a space that “eludes invasion, a world unseen that cannot, will not, be colonized” (115). Bhabha and Perez among other Third Space proponents work beyond the hegemonizing practices of the dominant discourses to reveal new sites of rhetorical performances. These performances as they relate to my study are best

highlighted when Bhabha and Perez talk of the “in-between” moments that reveal active pursuits of alternative perspectives and new knowledges.

Discussing the intricacies embedded in most African societies, Nnaemeka in her study “Nego-Feminism”<sup>1</sup> believes that for marginalized women, it is absolutely important to be aware of their indigenous values, because Africa feminism “challenges through negotiations and compromise” (208). As she articulates a theory about women, she imagines a “third space” a space that provides for a dynamic process through which women “go around patriarchal land mines” (208). She writes that “African women’s engagement still nurtures the comprise and hopefulness needed to build a harmonious society” (210). Nnaemeka takes the idea from the fact that African women are willing and ready to negotiate with and around men because as they challenge the continual constraints of their everyday lives, knowing how to negotiate cultural spaces shifts the argument from gender confrontation to gender specific imperatives. In “Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects,” I show that the Third Space sites that Bhabha, Perez and Nnaemeka highlight suggest intervening spaces that are effective in describing the process through which women must negotiate a female consciousness and subjectivity.

Chapter One, “In Search of Safe Spaces,” deals with Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Yvonne Vera’s novel *Under the Tongue*. Born in Oguta village in Southwestern Nigeria in the 1930s, Nwapa, as Marie Umeh notes “was born in the right place and at the right

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<sup>1</sup> In another article “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way,” Nnaemeka imagines a “third space of space” where borderless territory and free movement authorize the capacity to simultaneously theorize, practice theory and allow the mediation of policy (380). Here, the idea is that African women build on their indigenous values to create an authentic expression of themselves.

time” (2) because Africa, being the birth place of the “first great” female monarchs, allowed the writer a great foundation (2). Nwapa’s concern for women’s issues arose from a desire to write, to “put things down ... [to] feel fulfilled” (Umeh 668). Although she tells Umeh that she’s not a feminist, other critics like Gay Wilentz acknowledge her contribution to the African woman’s aesthetic because as a storyteller, she “passes on her cultural history to generations of modern African women” (4).

In *Efuru*, Nwapa moves her heroine outside of the dominant cultural framework through the goddess symbolism. The heroine, Efuru, having tried and failed to live within the dominant patriarchal framework of her society, finds solace in a mythical goddess, Uhammiri, who allows her a new source of legitimacy. A beautiful woman who initially runs away from her father’s house to marry the man of her dreams, Efuru is soon confronted with the realities of an African woman who fails in two of the most important traditional roles of a woman – motherhood and marriage. Because she’s unable to give birth to a child, her society construes her as a monster and her eventual failure in her two marriages strips her of the social legitimacy in a society that privileges children, especially male children. Thus, when Nwapa allows Efuru to become a goddess priestess, she attains what Patricia Collins calls a “safe space,” a space that constitutes “an interstitial site out of which new, undecidable forms of being and original theories and practices for emancipation, are produced” (Sandoval 85). Carol Christ in “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections” notes that these new avenues from which marginalized women can speak, such as the goddess symbolism, acknowledge a “legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power” (277). For Christ, acknowledging a goddess symbolism facilitates the women’s

imaginary or unconscious with a new intentionality, regarding the way they experience themselves as subjects, the ways in which they know and construct reality, and their political activities.

Born in Zimbabwe in 1964, Vera was, until her death in 2005, without a doubt, one of the most recognized figures among African women writers. The ingenuity, complexity and texture of her literary works are as interesting and intricate as was her life. In her ceaseless exposition of the marginalized women of Zimbabwean society, Vera gathers an astonishing variety of images of the silenced and underrepresented women who somehow get on with life amidst crushing poverty and violence. Her stark descriptions of that world include horrendous scenes such as that of a mother strangling her child and a would-be nursing student performing an abortion on herself. Her characters, often women suffering from the abusive consequences of war, talk in silent sobs, and futile gestures of a repressed soul.

In the preface to *Opening Spaces: An Anthology of African Women's Writings* Vera cites a scene from the film *Sankofa* in which a pregnant woman is whipped to death on a slave plantation. She says that terrifying as the scene is, other women surge forward and protect the deceased "with their bodies" (1) and help bring her child into the world. Vera reads in the women's act a bold statement in which they bring the victim back into visibility, allowing "the silenced to triumph over adversity" (1). Similarly, in her novel, *Under the Tongue*, Vera undertakes the challenge to recover the silenced from the travesties of rape. The novel tells the story of a 10-year-old girl Zhizha whose childhood memories are clouded by the unspeakable crime of incest committed by her father, Muroyiwa, a crime she can't articulate except in the only language she knows: "He put

mucus there, and blood...” (Vera 228). Because Zhizha cannot comprehend the trauma, she loses her voice, and she can no longer speak. “I die in my sleep. My voice is held by the lingering shadow. I cannot speak. I lie inside stone” (123). Vera’s protagonist retreats into silence, a silence here that becomes a “strategy of resistance and choice – a ritual of truth” (Lawrence 157). For Vera, the retreat into silence is construed as something active rather than passive. The rape victim, unable to articulate her thoughts, renders the text difficult to read, because silence, by its very nature is that which is not rather than what is. And yet, in this act of refusal to ‘speak,’ Vera constructs a viable space to act as Zhizha learns to speak a different voice, a voice that refuses to acquiesce to the terms of those forces that have obliterated her. When she eventually learns to “live with words” and hers and her grandmother’s voices become “rich with remembrance” (203), Vera demonstrates that women’s retreat into silence can be simply an attempt to know themselves.

Speaking at a writer’s symposium in Frankfurt, Germany in 1980, Mariama Ba invited women to name, honor and explore their experiences as they differed from a male-constructed view of the world. She implored them to “take our destiny into our own hands, in order to overthrow institutions so detrimental to us. We must no longer endure them. Like men, we must employ writing, that peaceful, but effective weapon” (416). Chapter Two, “Finding Voice, Writing Self” explores how Ba puts this call – employing writing as “effective weapon” – into action in her award winning novel, *So Long A Letter*, published in 1979. It examines how Ba constructs a space for an intense and intimate interaction between her protagonist, Ramatolaye, a middle-aged woman and her friend Aissatou, both of whom share the tragedy of having been abandoned by their

polygamous husbands.

Born in 1929 in Senegal, Ba was the child of an upper middle-class Senegalese politician and a mother who was a teacher. She attended the French School in Dakar and the Ecole Normale in Rufisque to become a “femme cadre (professional woman) who taught primary school and was active for many years in the feminist movement in Senegal ... as well as in international women’s organizations” (Rueschmann 4). Ba’s narrative constructs a personal identity that goes beyond the act of mere representation. The protagonist, Ramatolaye, takes on the additional act of self-preservation, when she challenges the oppressive site of polygamy. The reminiscences Ramatolaye documents for her dear friend Aissatou in a letter allow her the freedom and space to tell her story with candor and honesty. Ba allows her protagonist a voice through which she interrogates the environs she lives in, the limits imposed on her in her polygamous domestic sphere. She garners a rebellious voice as she negotiates between family and culture to sit and write her story. The letter allows her to dramatize and document her frustration so as to break the silence enforced upon her. Although constructed as a private letter to a close friend, the letter becomes, for Ramatolaye, “a confessional, self-discovering text” (Mortimer 76).

Chapter Three discusses Zimbabwean novelist Yvonne Vera’s two novels, *Without A Name* and *Butterfly Burning*. In these works, Vera challenges the valorization of motherhood fostered by conservative patriarchies through the depiction of transgressive acts like infanticide and abortion so as to re-appropriate her protagonists’ bodies from a conventional discourse. In addition, Vera contests the age old expectation for women in many African communities, to preserve a family by upholding their

maternal roles. As critics have argued, women across cultures are repeatedly told from infancy that they are “made” for childbearing.

*Butterfly Burning* is about Phephelaphi, a young girl who falls in love with an older man, Fumbatha. While the first few years of life together is blissful, Phephelaphi soon realizes that Fumbatha had simply constructed her in the maternal image he has harbored his entire life. When Phephelaphi learns that she’s pregnant, she aborts the fetus, because it threatens her desire to attend nursing school. It is through aborting her fetus, the narrative tells us, that Phephelaphi, temporarily, gives birth to her “self”. It is through abortion that Phephelaphi achieves a new sense of identity. A second pregnancy drives her to the edge and she commits suicide. Vera primes our reception of this view of an oppressed womanhood stating that “to build something new, you must be prepared to destroy the past” (*Butterfly* 20). *Without A Name* is about Mazvita who is raped and impregnated during the liberation war in rural Zimbabwe. Left burdened with a child, she relocates to the city where she lives with Joel who fails to appreciate her condition. To attain freedom, Mazvita commits infanticide and straps the corpse onto her back as she relocates to her roots in the village. Vera writes: “She [Mazvita] felt a strong sense of her own power and authority, of her ability to influence and change definitions of her own reality, adjust boundaries to her vision, banish limits to her progress” (34).

Phephelaphi and Mazvita’s lives are portrayed as narratives of female oppression. Through them, Vera disrupts the silence that surrounds taboos like infanticide and abortion, making it clear that in some instances, women kill their children as a way of reclaiming their own bodies. However, it is important to emphasize that Vera does not reject maternity or devalue the woman-centered experience of mothering. Her project is

to foster an imagined identity through which women get in touch with their inner selves even if it means transgressing the tenets of motherhood. She interrogates the myths and assumptions that impose oppressive role expectations and erase the realities of maternal experience.

Calixthe Beyala, who began writing in the mid 1980s, well after the Women's Movement of the 1970s, is distinctive early on in her attention to the woman-centered bodily experiences and her clear articulation of a female disembodied self. Although by the mid-80s women's writing had started affirming women's concerns, experiences, and voices as legitimate subject matters in African literature, Beyala's candid take on the literal erasure of the women's bodies from the public realm creates a revolutionary affront to a male dominated tradition which castigates the body as lacking and absent. Born in 1961 in the ghetto areas of Yaoundé, Cameroon's capital, Beyala saw firsthand the poverty and violence the urban poor experience. Thus her continual examination of such hitherto taboo subjects such as genital mutilation, prostitution and enforced motherhood informs her negotiation with various forms of oppression. This process involves a stress on female identity and an implicit transgression of social pressure in the representation of female subjectivity and an active construction of a female speaking subject.

Beyala's protagonist in *Your Name Shall be Tanga* is a dying 17-year-old girl named Tanga, who on her deathbed in prison tells her story to Anna-Claude, a French-Jewish woman who finds herself in the same prison cell. Raped by her father at the tender age of 6, Tanga's woes are compounded by a forced entry into prostitution so she could take care of her mother and sister. In addition, Tanga's mother forcibly circumcises her,

proclaiming her a woman who will be able to keep all the men. Tanga's entry into womanhood is directly associated with forced sexual intercourse, forfeiting the rights to her own body. However, despite her mother's prescription that Tanga becomes a prostitute, Tanga rejects the institution by eliminating herself from the sexual economy. When one of her clients, Hassan, refuses to offer her a settled life, Tanga imagines her own by mothering a 12-year-old street urchin. Thus, despite being silenced, raped, forced into incest and prostitution, Tanga determines to paint herself in bold strokes, and, in so doing, to know and celebrate her body.

The study of works written by African women is steadily gaining attention, although this wasn't the case forty years ago. When Charles Angoff and John Povey edited a volume, *African Writing Today* in 1969, their mission was simple: to assert a different view of Africa, one different from the oft disparaging view that saw Africa as "populated by savages who live in twig huts and have bones through their noses" (11). To this end, the editors assembled a wide range of literatures that would testify to the "virility and talent of African writing" (29). However, among the wide array of writers they picked, only one piece by a woman, Christina Aidoo, from Ghana was included, a piece the editors refer to as a "sad, wry little story" (28). This, despite the fact that Flora Nwapa, the premier African woman writer, had published her now classic novel, *Efuru*, three years earlier. The editors acknowledge though that any "omissions are the fault of editorial limitations" (29). But for Eustace Palmer, the first African critic to undertake a detailed review of the literature written on the African continent, the omission of any women writers wasn't as a result of "editorial limitations". For him, the criteria for inclusion in his survey, *An Introduction to the African Novel* published in 1972, centered

on the novelists' concern for the appropriate style and technical competence (xi). In Palmer's estimation, a novelist like Nwapa did not fit the bill because her sociological descriptions are "always irrelevant" and he consequently dismisses her as "inferior" (61). Later, in a more well researched and organized study, *The Growth of the African Novel* published in 1979, Palmer surveys 33 novels by 12 of Africa's best known writers, dedicating a chapter to each. He justifies his selections by claiming that he has "concentrated ... on the dozen or so novels which seem to be of some importance, and which are gradually finding their way into school and university syllabuses" (xv). Needless to say, all these novels he concentrates on are written by men. This criticism that issues from a "masculine" point of reference needs to be balanced with paying attention to those works that are often unheard, or have received scant attention like Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera. In telling the critical stories of the African woman, these novels by African women are in effect showing that there are other channels through which women survive and gain freedom.

Today, the male only trend has been reversed. In the last three decades, a greater number of texts by African women have appeared and invariably, an ever increasing number of academic articles have since been published, particularly on the most prominent women writers such as Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Ama Ata Aidoo and Flora Nwapa. In the 1980s, critics responded to the proliferation of African women's fiction by exploring the distinctive representations of the image of the African woman. An important example is Ann Adam Graves and Carol Boyce Davies' *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, published in

1986. In one of the essays, “Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers,” Davies contends that Buchi Emecheta’s purpose in *Joys of Motherhood* is to show the tragedy of woman’s existence when it remains circumscribed by motherhood alone (253). For her, African writers provide the other half of African people’s stories especially when it comes to motherhood. They present reality from the woman’s point of view and create distinct female worlds. They present the “great unwritten” stories of African literature. However, while *Ngambika* does a commendable job, articulating the tenets of African feminist criticism, the problem is that the study concentrates on examining images of women in African literature, most of which is written by male writers like Wole Soyinka, Ousmane Sembene and Ngugi Wa Th’ongo.

The 1990s experienced a boom of publications devoted to offering perceptive analyses of subject matter and narrative techniques. Florence Stratton, writing in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), contests the exclusionary practices that relegate women writers to the periphery, wondering why such writers should not gain admission in the literary canon. She strives to “write African women writers back into the African literary canon”, a canon that would not necessarily incorporate the women’s works into the established canon; rather a canon that would construct “alternative modes of reading” (13). Stratton, however, fails to read carefully into some of these “alternative modes of reading” when she undertakes a literal reading of the cultural figures found in the African women’s fiction. For instance, Stratton’s reduction of the goddess figure, Uhammiri, in Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*, into a negotiation between the gender roles reduces Uhammiri’s divine abilities, subjecting her

to the same standards as humans. Uhammiri is a water goddess, who according to Ifi Amadiume, is a spirit medium that is believed to give women a reprieve from their oppressive lives. Uhammiri is matrilineally inherited and possessed women become priestess and healers, as they are educated in the knowledge taught by the water goddess (Amadiume 97). This is the same risk that Wilson-Tagoe encounters when she too, reads Uhammiri as “embodying a contradictory element in the community’s traditional values: on the one hand, she is a goddess and therefore of the community, yet, on the other hand, she does not embody the community’s most cherished values of fertility and womanhood...” (16). In my reading, Nwapa’s use of Uhammiri as a goddess that gets re-inscribed in *Efuru*, the protagonist, serves to constitute a response to the perceived absurdity of society’s expectations. “Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects,” argues that through Uhammiri, Nwapa envisions an alternate site of resistance to society’s controlling norms, and as such, is not expected to adhere to the community’s cherished values of fertility and womanhood as Wilson-Tagoe remarks.

Nicki Hitchcott, seeking to highlight the African woman’s voice, surveys the general landscape of women writers in Francophone Africa. Her findings reveal that while women writers are doubly oppressed, they aren’t silent. Hitchcott believes that although their voices are often ignored as they are positioned as mystery or Other by (neo) colonialism and patriarchy, black African women’s writing resists the compartmentalization of feminine identity in a predetermined semantic space. This position reflects black feminist writer bell hooks’s view that in black communities women have not been silent. Instead, while their voices can be heard, the necessity is to

change the “nature and direction of our speech, to make speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (6). What Hitchcott and hooks fail to acknowledge, though, is that some writers deliberately use silence as an expression and strategy of resistance (Duncan 29).

Moving the criticism of African women’s fiction beyond the preoccupation of voice and sexual issues, Maggi Phillips in “Engaging Dreams: Alternative Perspectives on Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Writing” investigates the dream motif, observing that by imagining new realities, dreams offer a “site of ritual psychic healing ... [that] transgresses chaos and contacts the highest sacred authority” (90). Phillips reads in the works of Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo a manifest of creative powers that accrue from a coercive history that “has bombarded them with not one but at least two ideational worlds, enabling them to command such a spectrum of possibilities” (91). To Phillips then, the dream activity becomes a valuable storehouse of experience with which to explore narratives and question the nature of knowing. Phillips’s work comes closest to what I undertake in my study. But while Phillips concentrates on the dream motif, I engage other motifs like “silence” that constitute Third Space sites that allow the protagonists to alter their lived experiences.

The dawn of the twenty-first century brought with it a new literary awareness in African women’s fiction. Critical emphasis shifted to establishing the “difference” between Western feminism and African feminism. The critics, as Nnaemeka notes, “wanted to emphasize the importance of cultural literacy” (1) as far as theorizing African

women's literature is concerned. Nfah-Abbenyi in a book length study on African women writers, *Gender in African Women's Writing*, takes a critical feminist look at the ways in which women writers "redefine the contradictions inherent in gender in the African literary context" (14). Nfah-Abbenyi's project, anchored on the premise that African women are hardly represented in the canon of literary studies, takes gender as its unifying thesis, as the author seeks to demonstrate that the subversion of difference and the construction of identity, subjectivity and sexuality are all interlocking issues. Like Nnaemeka who theorizes that African feminism is a theory of "negotiation," Nfah-Abbenyi shows that African women writers do not separate one form of oppression from another. She cites the concept of motherhood saying that in an African setting, motherhood is understood not as an institution appended to patriarchy, but as an experience, with all its attending pains and rewards. Hence her study centers on the negotiation within gender relations, and the ways in which such relations are subverted by the writers.

Nfah-Abbenyi's study is further deepened by a collection of essays edited by Obioma Nnaemeka entitled *The Politics of (M)Othering*. The essays herein set out to engage feminist theory, showing how issues in feminism – voice, victimhood, agency, subjectivity, sisterhood – are revealed in different, complex and interesting ways in an African context. In the introduction, Nnaemeka examines the intersection of the issues of choice and voice as they are argued in current feminist debates, questioning the validity of speaking the "Other's" problems. Such an undertaking is relevant in so far as the

purpose is to establish an “authentic” feminist voice from the so-called Third World as they attempt to establish a counter discourse to the hegemonic Eurocentric discourse.

Questions of women’s autonomy and individual selfhood are further enhanced in Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s study, *African Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. Ogunyemi’s book is dedicated to proposing a vernacular theory as a background to understanding 28 novels written by eight established Nigerian women writers. She looks at these novels as “counter narratives” that reveal the “politics of oppression” that women go through (4). She specifically concentrates on amplifying the role of the different women in Nigerian society – the rural woman, the urban woman, the matriarch, and the divinely inspired mammywater. Comprehensive as her study is, Ogunyemi concentrates on Nigerian women novelists, giving a unique if somewhat limited view of the African woman’s novel.

In addition, the analysis is dedicated to establishing how Nigerian women novelists “contribute to the democratization process by producing a literary theory to provide insightful readings of Nigerian women’s novels” (7). Like the recent criticism on the African novel that emphasizes the changing role of the African woman or the New African woman’s rebellion against patriarchal and colonial ideology, Ogunyemi argues that African women’s texts “contain political innuendoes as well as criticism of failure in the domestic and public domains” (5). Unfortunately, despite her compelling readings of the eight Nigerian novelists, Ogunyemi’s study is restricted to the western part of the continent and her formulation of a vernacular theory does not capture the rich sense of the diverse and complex circumstances and experiences of African women writers.

Considering all these studies, it's clear that the study of African women's fiction is a dynamic, diverse and budding scholarly research interest. The critics have gone past the descriptions of how women are represented, superseding this kind of criticism with more complex analysis of gender and women's oppression. However, what we still see in most of the criticism is a continued effort to recover and make known African women's writing that for the most part has been neglected or given scant attention. The criticism needs to go beyond these inquiries to analyze how African women writers examine the complexity and multiplicity of female subjectivity and the workings of patriarchal domination.

There have been some endeavors to this end. A new book length study on the works of Yvonne Vera, *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Vision of Yvonne Vera*, sets out to "map out directions in Vera's work" (xi). The book features essays that trace the critical and decisive moments of Zimbabwean history, revealing the value of an "alternative psycho-social signage by which herstory of the nation may be told" (xii). Invariably, *Sign and Taboo* attempts to explicate an exclusive relationship between history and fiction. In the concluding portion of the book, for example, Khombe Mangwanda discusses the link between land, the ancestors and their descendants in *Nehanda* and shows how Vera deploys this history to overturn colonial discourse and depict a world that excludes the settler (xv). In another essay, Maurice Taonevi Vambe theorizes spirit possession as it relates to forms of resistance and the construction of the nationalist anti-colonial narratives. "Imagined Realities, Defying Subjects" complements such studies that illustrate the diversity of cultural practice, thereby opening up new

spaces of interrogation. Each chapter deals with texts that question and resist the dominant patriarchal and colonial meta-narratives through an examination of how power is exercised, negotiated and resisted in the different societies as the following discussion shows.

## Chapter One

In search of “safe spaces”: Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966)

and Yvonne Vera’s *Under the Tongue* (1996)

African women writers, both in spite of and because of a historical background that held them to an assumption of female inferiority, have engaged in rhetorical and performative strategies designed to posit a sense of self-definition for the women in Africa. Because in many of these societies women are largely invisible, it has been of particular importance to see to it that their identities are brought to the fore. And over the past few decades, the situation seems to be more encouraging. The rationale behind my claim is that women writers have started contesting the strictly defined roles which society has assigned them, shattering the institutional structure of patriarchy that affords them little to no space. In this chapter, I show how Flora Nwapa (Nigeria) and Yvonne Vera (Zimbabwe) develop strategies through which they construct “safe spaces” from which they re-inscribe women in their respective societies into the symbolic order. “Safe spaces” as a concept that can be performed comes from the work of Patricia Hill Collins, a Black American feminist theorist. Collins’s work on black feminist theory has been extremely influential in imagining alternative realities for marginalized people, especially women of color, whose ethnicity and gender have rendered them invisible in mainstream American society. In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Collins theorizes that while domination “may be inevitable as a social fact, it is unlikely to be hegemonic as an ideology within that social space where Black women speak freely” (95).

Collins highlights three primary “safe spaces” for African American women. The first is women’s relationships with one another. Collins believes that when women are there for each other, especially when they mentor one another, they create an empowering mechanism by “passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women” (102). The other two safe spaces are cultural and are constituted by the black women’s blues tradition and the voices of black women authors. She notes that such cultural expressions, especially the blues tradition, have historically given voice to the voiceless.

Although Collins’ “safe spaces” are specifically located within the African American culture, understood within the context of marginalized women, they offer relevant theories about how women writers in general have critically examined the repressive social structures in their societies. Thus, even if the African women writers’ literary portrayal of women’s lives in Africa brings into focus peculiarities of patriarchal and imperialist control that aren’t replicated elsewhere, how and why they rebel against traditional expectations and boundaries can be understood within a wider theoretical framework. Specifically, when Collins tells stories of how African American women have been able to talk and listen to each other, helping “one another [to] grow in some fashion” (104), she highlights an aspect that has a cultural significance in African societies as well. In fact, Collins cites Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo’s novel *Changes* (1991) which she says uses “friendship between two African professional women to explore the challenges facing professional women in contemporary African societies” (104).

In this chapter, I show how Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue* (1996), utilize the idea of women's relationships with each other to construct safe spaces through which they attain a sense of identity. As Collins explains, Black women's lives "are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African American women without our objectification as the Other" (99). In *Efuru*, the heroine, marginalized in society because she cannot fulfill her maternal obligations, seeks nurturance and safety in the female goddess Uhammiri, with whom she forms a relationship that shields her from society's wrath. In *Under the Tongue*, relationships play a significant role in uplifting women from the restrictions of patriarchal domination. When ten-year-old Zhizha loses her voice because her father rapes her, it takes her grandmother's nurturance and encouragement for the young girl to regain her voice and stature.

Thus, the idea of "safe spaces" as articulated by Nwapa and Vera not only refers to spaces that are devoid of trauma, stress, violence and exploitation; the term also encompasses emotional and psychological safety in which women receive love, affirmation and support. Because these spaces are free of surveillance of dominant group members (in this case cultural elders and men), women can relate more with each other as friends, family or as in *Efuru*, in ethereal spaces like the goddess symbolism. The two novels, separated by 30 years, reinforce the idea that the search for "safe spaces" in African women's literature is an ever recurring quest. The characters of both novels represent a range of women whose experiences in hostile environments inspire journeys (literal and/or psychological) of self-recreation, a fundamental tenet in African women's fiction. In 1966, Nwapa felt that locating her heroine in an ethereal goddess symbolism

would affirm her journey towards empowerment and autonomy. Thirty years later, the conditions in Vera's country are far different from what Nwapa encountered. The changed landscape notwithstanding, the women's marginal positions hadn't changed much and Vera finds it imperative to seek a different version of the "safe spaces".

Educated at the prestigious University College, Ibadan, in Nigeria, Nwapa had an illustrious career as a teacher, government official, business woman and writer. In most of her writings, she subverts the idea that women should adhere to oppressive traditional values without questioning their merit. As the first African woman writer to be published internationally in 1966, Nwapa broke the silence that was often attributed to the African woman, and complicated the female identity as delineated in the literature of the pioneering male African writers like Chinua Achebe and his brothers, by critiquing both their gender conventions and power relations between men and women in the homestead (Umeh 663). Gay Wilentz notes that with the publication of her first novel *Efuru* in 1966, Nwapa brought "a fresh perspective to traditional West African culture and modern Nigeria in literary works by exploring a woman's point of view and exposing a society close to its pre-colonial roots" (3). But when it was first published, the novel met with a mixture of critical reviews. Coming after the publication of other giant African novels like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* published in 1958, Nwapa's *Efuru* at first met with resistance. As one critic explains, "when it [*Efuru*] was not ignored, it was dismissed for its strong feminist stance and criticized for suggesting that the men were weak" (Ajayi-Soyinka). In particular, Eustace Palmer, in *An Introduction to the African Novel*, is critical of what he deems Nwapa's sociological descriptions which he thinks are "irrelevant"; he describes the entire novel as "inferior" (61).

To champion the women's values, Nwapa sets the novel in Ogwuta, Nigeria, the village where she grew up in the 1930s. She wanted to recreate what it must have been like for an average African woman before the advent of Christianity. As a child, she explains, she was never allowed to mingle with the rest of the community because her parents were Christians. This meant that she was never exposed to her society's traditional cultural mores and the little she heard about these values, she gleaned from her grandparents who she says resisted Christianity to the very end. In her grandfather's homestead, she listened to stories her grandfather told, stories that fascinated and excited her imagination. She tells Jell-Bahlasen in an interview that it was in such a setting that she was able to listen to all the stories about Uhammiri, the water goddess, and the other community gods (644).

She also attributes the underprivileged position of the African woman to a systematic policy of preference in a homestead where girls are treated differently from boys. For instance in most Igbo family culture, boys between the ages of 8 and 15 are allowed to play all day while the girls are held down to domestic work. Nwapa believes that the preferential treatment showed to boys allows them to imbibe a superior status and become privileged. She cites an instance where her mother-in-law chides her for allowing her son in the kitchen. As she notes, "a woman who says she is oppressed and then has a son and treats him like a king, such a woman is perpetuating the problems we are complaining about" (qtd in James 114).

To explain the many ways women in Africa construct safe spheres to attain subjectivity, Chikwenye Ogunyemi notes that in the Nigerian society of the Igbo, women often form female empowerment groups that engage in such beauty concepts as the Uli

rituals (when women paint themselves with either camwood or henna). By creating a space where they feel comfortable to meet both their physical and spiritual needs, the rituals become an experience in transformative power. Uli, as Ugunyemi explains, enhances a woman's beauty. "As an art form, it parallels drawing in ink, painting on a blank wall, composing literature" (19). The painting thus becomes a form of writing or painting on one's self. Emphasizing its spiritual qualities, Ugunyemi writes:

With their cryptographic powers, women learn and emulate nature's protean qualities osmotically, as should men, for the commonweal. The shift from one's self to another, from the domestic to the public, from the mundane to the sacred, from the human to other aspects of the environment, from painting to singing or writing, illustrates woman's versatility and the possibility of generating order, hope, and healing in the community. (20)

By moving into the public sphere, women make use of these artistic spaces as a base from which they gain power and strategic roles in society. Although Nwapa's women do not sing, write nor paint, their versatility lies in the power they attain from the female goddess that the writer ascribes them. Operating from a culture that excludes women from the public sphere, Nwapa resorts to a mythical form that captures the values of the African woman's subjectivity within a specific location and context. Writing in "Women and Creative Writing," Nwapa extrapolates the importance of highlighting women's experiences in a traditional African society, where their social and economic activities, but above all, their preoccupation with such problems as infertility, and childbearing demand new ways of exposition. "Apart from exposing the pain, misery and humiliation

which childless or barren women suffer in traditional society,” she writes, “the two novels [*Efuru* and *Idu*] give insight into the resourcefulness and industriousness of women which often made them successful, respected, and influential people in the community” (Nwapa 93).

The resourcefulness Nwapa is referring to here is an awareness of alternative ways through which the women’s bodies are returned into focus in the imaginary and symbolic as agents through a goddess symbolism. Significantly, Nwapa weaves the goddess myth in her fiction for a number of reasons. On the surface, the myth serves to lend color, depth and mystery to the fiction. On the other hand, if this mythic goddess is considered a clue to the time when women were worshipped as goddesses and were, in some aspects more powerful than the men, then the fiction takes on a new meaning.

In order to understand the importance of the mythological goddesses, a brief history of the African people’s use of myth is necessary. The worship of goddesses in the Bantu speaking sub-Saharan Africa was an integral part of pre-colonial Africa until the arrival of the Europeans, Arabs and other external powers which effectively saw to the demise of the goddess culture. Before then, the goddess had assumed many aspects. She was often seen in a role of creator and/or mother, and sometimes, she was invested with destructive powers. In most of West Africa, she was associated with life giving elements like the sun and the earth. As Donna Wilshire explains, “through the ubiquitous image of the goddess, they [goddess worshippers] experienced the female as primordial creatrix. They ‘saw’ in her image the idea of wholeness and cooperation as the PATTERN shared throughout the universe – in both the macrocosm and microcosm” (102). But with the arrival of external powers, as Jennifer Woolger notes, there emerged a shift in the veneration that was once

given to goddess culture and mythology (24-30). The women lost their sacredness because the new powers brought with them monotheistic religions – Islam and Christianity – religions that are well suited for a patriarchal dominance. The goddesses became secondary to the male god who with time, transformed, reinterpreted and suppressed the maternal goddess. The loss of the feminine spirit, notes Sylvia Perera, created an imbalance of the masculine and feminine principles that in turn has had a profound implication on how we have created our world and function with it (26). Like Perera, I believe that when this happened, the life affirming principle women experienced through the goddess mythology was lost to them.

But as historian John Drewal has written in “Performing the Other: Mami Wata Worship in Africa,” the African people took advantage of the European’s presence and borrowed from their new exotic cultures to reaffirm and reinvent their culture. He writes:

In their worship of Mami Wata, a spirit believed to be ‘foreign,’ African peoples from Senegal to Tanzania take exotic images and ideas, interpret them according to indigenous precepts, invest them with new meanings, and then re-create and represent them in new and dynamic ways to serve their own aesthetic, devotional, and social needs. (160)

The re-conception of the goddess myth allows Nwapa to present a double vision for her heroines – one amplifying their subordinate nature, and the other representing the mythic, mother goddess idea of women. As Carol Christ points out, the social and political struggles for better conditions for women are strengthened through recourse to an underlying empowering structure of female imagery (227). By valuing and attending to the cultural female images of the goddesses – highlighting their necessity, and finding

“analogical richness” (227) as is revealed and expressed in the women’s everyday lives, Nwapa is able to inquire into the female psyche and see the female body in a cultural context; how it has been interpreted and perceived.

Nwapa draws the concept of the goddess worship from the mythical influence of the Ugwuta Lake where her community is located in southwestern Nigeria. The Ogwuta community, unlike other pre-colonial societies, allowed women certain rights. Marie Umeh suggests that in Ogwuta, a woman who distinguished herself would be allowed to break the kola nut (a ritual ordinarily reserved for titled and other men). In addition, any woman who paid bride price for a male relation would be accorded honor: “The Ogwuta community is therefore one of those special communities in Igboland where status and recognition are not biologically based” (663). It is also this same community that privileged the worship of goddesses because the feminine principle brought them a sense of peace of mind.

According to Karla Holloway, “the figurative presence of feminine deities or goddesses in African women’s writings allows for a revision of the traditional cultural mores, especially when asserted by women’s voices and controlled through women’s vision” (165). Holloway adds that the weaving of the goddess imagery into the women’s creative texts anchors the texts “to a cultural and woman centered ideology that specifies a black women writers’ canon” (166). In other words, the goddess is invested with a cushion that offers a safe haven for women who live contrary to the established society norms. Although the goddess is sometimes described as the symbol of infertility (whoever worships her cannot give birth), even in this capacity, she is perhaps the most

ambivalent and therefore the most powerful of deities, since what she lacks in children, she makes up with wealth and freedom.

*Efuru* is the story of an Igbo woman of the same name who falls outside of her society's sanctioned parameters when she fails in two of the most important womanly duties – marriage and motherhood. From our first impressions of Efuru, it is evident that she possesses unique characteristics: “Efuru was her name. She was a remarkable woman. It is not only that she came from a distinguished family. She was distinguished herself”(7). The story begins when 20-year-old Efuru has run away from her father's compound to her new lover, Adzua's house. Despite the latter's inability to pay the bride price, Efuru nonetheless risks societal repercussions to live with the man of her choice. This is the first of the many transgressive actions that highlight Efuru's journey as she moves from being a passive entity who adheres to societal dictates to a subject who chooses who to marry and when to leave an abusive husband.

To Efuru, marriage is an ideal and a vocation. In the first scenes, Nwapa creates an appropriate scenario for a typical traditional marriage setting. The young woman is portrayed as an ideal wife who anticipates her husband's every need at any turn. She cooks and tends the house. But while Nwapa's initial somewhat idealistic portrayal of Efuru seems overdrawn, it's not long before the sharpest points in the novel occur with Efuru's slow-dawning realization of the implications of womanhood in traditional Igbo society. It's as though Nwapa sets up this idealism to make the impact of its loss all the more intense. Efuru gradually discovers how powerless she may be as a married woman especially if she cannot fulfill her traditional obligatory roles. First, Efuru has to undergo the ritualistic “bath,” also known as female circumcision, even if on her own she's not

inclined to do so. “The women went back to the house and there it was done. Efurú screamed and screamed. It was so painful”(14). From this instance, Efurú learns of the conspiracy of the traditional mores – on the one hand, the women who undertake the ritual promise her innumerable benefits of the ‘bath,’ like becoming a woman. But on the other hand, no one tells her of the pain or the fact that it would take her a long time to conceive after the “bath”. As Linda Strong-Leek explains, “circumcision is required to keep women’s sexual desires under control. Men must remain in power, sexually, politically, economically and otherwise” (536).

Secondly, Efurú experiences gradually the painful awakening to her inability to have children. When her first child dies, and she fails to conceive for a second time, she becomes painfully aware of her inadequacy in a society that believes implicitly in children. In most African communities, women are tasked with preserving the family and culture by giving birth to numerous children. If they step out of these restricted boundaries of their assigned roles, they threaten the community’s existence. Among the Igbo people, a woman only gains currency if she gives birth and her sense of security is reinforced after the birth of a male child. This, according to Celestine Obi, gives her the title of “wife.” As for the barren wife, the consequences are dire. Obi writes that a childless woman is regarded as a monstrosity, while a childless marriage is universally recognized as a failure. The barren woman is constantly made the object of conversation and ridicule by some of her female neighbors (Obi). “It was a curse not to have children,” Efurú wistfully mourns. “Her people did not take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure” (207). In this respect, Efurú is

unwittingly stepping out of the boundaries – she’s failed to give birth and invariably, she risks abdicating the responsibility of cultural preservation.

The irony however is that it’s fellow women who, in an unrelenting desire to preserve the traditional ways within a patriarchal system, collude in the disempowerment of one another. Efurú’s inability to give birth is compounded by Omirima, the village gossip who incites the other women into disempowering the already vulnerable Efurú.

One day they went to the stream, and while they were swimming the people in the stream began to gossip.

‘Husband and wife, they are swimming together,’ one woman began.

‘They come to the stream everyday,’ said another.

...

‘Seeing them together is not the important thing,’ another said. ‘The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it if it is not fruitful. Of what use is it if your husband licks your body, worships you and buys you everything in the market for you and you are not productive? (137)

Clearly, the speaker in the above excerpt, Omirima, sums up the essence of society’s expectations even as these expectations are ‘naturalized’ through an appeal to tradition. To Omirima, a happy marriage is not an end to everything. Rather, for a woman to be complete, she ought to give birth and enter into the reproductive mode of a society. This symbolic expectation is based on what Michel Foucault calls a society’s “regime of truths” (131), ingrained in a society’s text and manifested in its beliefs, values, and

mores. Through these mores, society organizes, represents and symbolically justifies its anxieties and fears in relation to oppression. Foucault postulates that:

Truth isn't outside of power or lacking in power... as a thing of this world, truth is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints and induces regular effect of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth. That is the type of discourse it accepts and makes function as true. (*Knowledge/power* 131)

In this excerpt, Foucault is saying that within the social body, the relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations such as kinship, family and cultural mores through which oppression is exerted. Omirima's diatribe shows her propagating an unwritten code of truths that are used to dominate women. Omirima is quick to blame Efuru for failure to fulfill her obligation as a wife because in this society, marriage and procreation are at the center of existence especially for women.

Thus, Nwapa's decision to commit Efuru as a goddess priestess and worshiper, comes as no surprise when juxtaposed with society's attempt to censure the heroine's spirit. Having tried to live within the realm of tradition, and failed, Efuru is re-inscribed through a goddess from whom she attains both psychological and emotional comfort. In addition, as a goddess worshiper, Efuru gains considerable leverage in society, not to mention the riches that come with the position. "I dream several nights of the lake and the woman of the lake ... [one night] I got to the bottom of the lake and to my surprise, I saw an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb," (146) Efuru tells her father. It is through this dream that Efuru first learns of her new role as a goddess priestess. "You are a great woman" the Dibia (traditional healer) tells Efuru before

addressing her father: “Nwashike Ogene, your daughter is a great woman. The goddess of the lake has chosen her to be one of her worshippers. It is a great honor. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you” (Nwapa 153).

Efuru’s search for a more active feminist role is reflected in the imagery of the goddess Uhammiri’s power. Her visions reveal Uhammiri in her most resplendent moment – the moment with which she can easily identify – the fluidity. Efuru observes that each time she dreams about the woman of the lake, her fortunes double the following day. “Debtors came of their own accord to pay their debts” (147). Hence, she uses her own spirituality to come to an understanding of herself. “In realizing Uhammiri’s ‘golden handshake’ of wealth and beauty for Efuru, Nwapa raises the issue of barrenness to a level of privilege and sets this privilege in tension with Efuru’s desire for children” (Phillips 93). As a goddess worshipper, Efuru recreates and represents the spirit in new and dynamic ways that serve her devotional and social needs.

Uhammiri’s presence as a deity allows Nwapa to constitute a response to the perceived absurdity of society’s expectations upon Efuru’s life. Through Uhammiri, Nwapa envisions an alternative reality that for a while corrects the restrictions that Efuru suffers. This choice then is seen directly reflecting the feminist context within which this story is written. Nwapa draws on the goddess motif as a way of helping Efuru find solace and healing. She underscores the fact that this “safe place,” of women relating to each other, poses an essential challenge to tradition and attains what Nancy Walker calls “feminist fantasy” (150). Contrasting the genres of realism and popular romance or what she deigns “fantasy realism,” Walker notes that the author who begins with the premise of an alternate reality for her characters to inhabit departs from the rules of realism and

gains greater freedom (151). “The feminist fantasy,” Walker writes, “commonly demonstrates the opposite pattern, in which the female heroine begins in the realm of traditional culture and moves away from its rules and restrictions” (150).

However, despite being aligned with a “feminist fantasy” in the form of a goddess, Efuru’s woes don’t vanish overnight. Still hoping that she can have it both ways – as a goddess worshiper and a mother, Efuru marries her second husband, Gilbert Eneberi. Shortly before meeting Eneberi, Efuru muses that “marriage is like picking a parcel from numerous parcels. If you are lucky, you pick a valuable one. It does not depend at all on the length of the courtship” (96). In Eneberi, she seems to have picked a “valuable” package. A western educated young man, Eneberi makes Efuru laugh as he lavishes her with plenty of gifts. They swim together, attracting the jealousy and wrath of the village women.

But when she still fails to give birth, as a “good” wife, Efuru decides to get her husband a second wife. “We have lived happily these four years,” Efuru tells Eneberi, “and I’m worried. If we get another wife, a young girl, she will have children for you and I will love the children because they are your own children” (174). If Efuru cannot have children, it’s still her obligation to find a suitable replacement for her husband. In “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” Gayle Rubin writes that in addition to exchanging women, societies that observe kinship systems, also “exchange sexual access, rights and people in concrete systems of social relationships.” The process gets complicated especially for women because “the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full right to themselves” (278). Efuru doesn’t have full rights to herself in this marriage arrangement, even if she had married

Eneberi on her own volition. She needed to have given birth in order to uphold a proper kinship system that rests on a “fruitful” marriage. To the villagers and neighbors, “Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce” (Nwapa 24).

Efuru believes that by getting her husband a second wife, her life would be balanced out, since the new wife would provide the necessary children and perchance, society’s condemnation of her inability to give birth would be lifted. She explains:

What is wrong in marrying a second wife? It is only a bad woman who wants her husband all to herself. I don’t object to his marrying a second wife, but I do object to being relegated to the background. I want to keep my position as the first wife, for it is my right ... He is the lord and master, if he wants to marry her I cannot stop him. (53-55)

But Eneberi is not pacified with Efuru’s efforts and when she falls ill, he attributes the sickness to infidelity, perhaps in an attempt to get rid of her. It is at this moment that Efuru abandons her quest to be a “good woman.” Eneberi, without the benefit of any investigation, asserts that his wife is guilty of adultery: “The gods are angry with her and will kill her if she does not confess” (216). By invoking the gods, Eneberi engages in a rhetoric about the wrath of the gods, as he seeks to legitimize his imminent desertion. Forsaken with no way out, Efuru becomes conscious of her own alienation from her society’s conception of her; she has become other than the image she had pictured for herself – that of a good wife.

The bitter truth for Efuru is that even as she seeks to be the good wife, her identity formation still has to do with the commercial basis of female sexuality in a system of exchange where the man still has all the power. Irigaray is weary of women like Efuru,

who desire to fit into the patriarchal society, while at the same time exposing its ills. She writes that in order for such women to arrive at the point where they can enjoy their pleasure as women, they have to understand the layers of oppression that affect them. “By claiming to resort to pleasure alone as the solution to her problems, she runs the risk of missing the reconsideration of a social practice upon which her pleasure depends” (217).

Efuru’s pleasure and her very survival in this instance still depend on a patriarchal system and she has two options: either adhere to the system’s rules and expectations or acknowledge that her femininity is simply a transaction in a commercial system in which she has no say. In this case, if she still intends to remain the “good wife,” she has to “confess” to an imaginary crime of adultery so that her husband’s sense of pleasure and manhood remain intact in the eyes of society. Irigaray asks: “How can this object of transaction assert the right to pleasure without extricating itself from the established commercial system?” (105). Efuru does find a way to extricate herself from this commercial system. She leaves her husband Eneberi for good: “I went to my husband’s house and collected all my belongings. Then I called my age group and told them formally what I was accused of ... so here I am. I have ended where I began – in my father’s house... I have nothing to say to Eneberi. He will forever regret his act” (220).

The point though is that Efuru is not where she started. In spite of being childless, she continues dreaming of the goddess Uhammiri, dreams that offer a creative interpretation and representation of her life and experience. In these dreams, Efuru goes beyond the surface of her life, the threshold that separates as well as unites her to Uhammiri. For Efuru therefore, communication with Uhammiri becomes a journey that facilitates her

healing. As Drewal says, “the benefits that Uhammiri brings – monetary wealth is acquired rather than inherited and is therefore outside the kinship system” (161). Rendered outside of the kinship system, Efurū is allowed a sense of peace and this correlation removes the ‘normal’ constraints of her life so that she lives “not merely within a physical/carnal world, but more importantly, a metaphysical realm” (Strong-Leek 535).

To attain this “metaphysical realm” that Strong-Leek talks of, Efurū has to construct an altar in her house which provides her the opportunity to probe her spiritual aesthetic concerns. Kay Turner, writing about altars in *A Beautiful Necessity: The Art and Meaning of Women’s Altars*, says that even if, by definition, altars perpetuate an affiliation with the Divine, women’s altars promote a particular ideal relationship and approve its fundamental continuity within women’s lived experiences (24). The community medicine man, the Dibia, divines Efurū’s newfound status thus:

Now, listen to me. Uhammiri is a great woman. She is our goddess and above all she is very kind to women. If you are to worship her, you must keep her taboos. Oriē day is her great day. You are not to fish on this day. I know you don’t fish, but you should persuade others not to fish. You are not to sleep with your husband. You have to boil, roast or fry plantains on Oriē days. Uhammiri likes plantains very much ... when you go to bed, you must be in white on Oriē nights. You can sacrifice a white fowl to Uhammiri on this day. When you feel particularly happy, or grateful, you should sacrifice a white sheep to her. Above all, you will keep yourself

holy. When you do all these, then you will see for yourself what the woman of the lake would do for you. (153-54)

Efuru's sense of suffering impels her then to have an active affiliation with the embodied divine Uhammiri. The altar for her becomes a place for affecting transformative communication. It becomes a place of healing, a place in which she keeps her body holy and desists from all masculine oriented activities like fishing. In addition, Uhammiri's altar becomes a center from which Efuru can advocate her world-view – it becomes both a model of and an instrument for relationship. She uses it as a site for seeking Uhammiri's divine help to sustain her relationship with her community, especially given that the goddess allows her to carry the secret to wealth.

Since most traditional art forms of the masculine ordered societies have historically not been available to women, feminist scholars have encouraged women to use alternative modes for self-expression, especially using their own bodies as art objects. Mary Daly in particular has expressed the need for women to create a “*space set apart*” that would provide a state of mind “where it is possible to be oneself, without the contortions of mind, will, feeling and imagination demanded of women by sexist society” (156; *emphasis in original*). Likewise, Efuru furnishes her altar with an earthenware pot that she places at the corner of her room with a piece of white cloth. This ensemble clearly speaks to a direct challenge to the patriarchally ordained symbolic order of her society. She recreates an image of her Goddess and on the days she worships (Orie day or the fourth day of the week), she wears white, a symbolic color that testifies to her purity and she refrains from having any sexual relations. Efuru's body as a site of sacred power and positive identification is thus emphasized. Turner reiterates the point thus:

When a woman fully turns to beloved sacred images, she crosses a space between representation and reality. She goes to her altar, completely herself, bodily exposed and ready to receive the love and transformation that is given there in embodied form. Embodiment is the source of her intimacy with the Divine. Together women and their images enter into a ‘working’ relationship that may last a lifetime. Their work is in, and through and with the body; their spiritual alliance is formulated in experience and entrustment, one body to another. (127)

Efuru makes Uhammiri’s altar her place for a conscious change – here, she becomes herself. She prays, meditates and focuses. But while the altar is a social construction that proclaims her essential identity, this is not to advance the essentialist claim – that women are essentially different from men; rather, this simply shows that women’s regenerative capacities are sought in different feminine ideals. Miriam Chamani explains the potency of altars that have their origins in water:

Water – the female- was the first altar. That is where spirit was first carried. Water is the womb of the universe. Water is the place to be. Woman’s role was, from the beginning, always bringing light. A woman always knows better in prayer. She can always bring the prayer to use (qtd in Turner 56).

Thus, Uhammiri becomes Efuru’s guiding light. She offers wealth, although she cannot offer her children. In fact, one of Uhammiri’s many sided facets is that as the lake goddess, she is vested with destructive powers. For instance, if anyone paddles on the

lake at night, they risk trespassing Uhammiri's realm and would expect to be punished. Yet, her worshippers like Efuru are blessed with wealth, beauty and respect.

Efuru is also endowed with a rich imaginative life; she extends her explorations to a female self not fully confined within masculinist values and norms. Once, while marveling at a bright moon on a clear night, Efuru engages the services of the village story teller, Nkwo, who weaves a session about female heroines and their extraordinary adventures. These transformative stories signify or suggest a woman's potential for freedom. One of the stories is about "the woman whose daughter disobeyed her and as result was married to a spirit" (Nwapa 106). The twist is that while the spirit is presented as an evil medium constructed to instill discipline among the listeners, the story as a whole establishes the resilience women can muster in the face of danger.

Then she went to the room where her sister and the spirit were sleeping.

Her sister got up immediately she saw her. Then Nkwo used the banana leaves, putting them on the feet of the spirit, so that he would think that his wife was still lying beside him. Then they left the room. Nkwo brought a tin of kerosene. She poured it on the roof and set the house on fire. The house burnt to ashes, and thus the spirit was killed. (110)

This is an African cultural story that incorporates the potential to express a woman's desires for freedom and for her ardent listeners. Nkwo's visionary story serves to unbind both the listener's and teller's minds, allowing them to move beyond the daily limits, so they can envisage both a physical and psychic sense of freedom. In this social imaginary, Efuru and the other listeners feel the magical power in the story, and in the singing, which has the power to uplift them. As Trinh T. Minh-ha explains in "Grandma's Story,"

the story's fascination "may be explained by its power both to give a vividly felt insight into the life of other people and revive or keep alive the forgotten, dead-ended, turned-into-stone parts of ourselves ... it is mainly valued for its artistic potential and for the 'religious beliefs' or 'primitive-mind' – revealing superstitions mirrored by its content" (466). Thus, the visionary and mythic world that the story invokes does not seek to recover a passive African past; rather, it provides a needed sanctuary of escape or safe space.

In this sense, the stories are not escapist fairy tales that invite Efurú and the entire audience to immerse themselves in story telling rituals. bell hooks notes that

all too often the colonized mind thinks of the imagination as the realm of the psyche that, if fully explored, will lead one into madness, away from reality. Consequently, it is feared. For the colonized mind to think of the imagination as the instrument that does not estrange us from reality, but returns us to the real more fully, in ways that help us to confront and cope, is a liberatory gesture. (55)

The stories simply act as a catalyst for Efurú's experiences, facilitating a sense of liberation – especially from the anxiety and regret she feels on that beautiful night when the moon was up – because they reminded her of her past love with her first husband, Adzua.

In addition, Nwapa's use of story-telling can be seen as liberating Efurú from her routine ordering of reality, and allowing her to encounter an imagined world. Not only does the experience inspire a sense of entertainment, but recollecting this experience also produces a spiritual fulfillment. Thus, when imagining her future as devoid of any

opportunities for personal fulfillment – because she lacks a child – Efuru speaks of the story in terms of the imagination with the power to conceive an alternative reality that brings forth the true image of her situation; it is a place reality gets to be re-created.

Significantly, Efuru also gains strength and confidence from a community of women. Ajanupu, her aunt, becomes the agent through which Efuru is able to disentangle herself from Eneberi and all the male world. Ajanupu awakens Efuru by re-appropriating the power from Eneberi. When Eneberi accuses Efuru of infidelity, it is Ajanupu who rescues her niece's life from the mockery that results from a perceived transgression. "Our ancestors will punish you" Ajanupu tells Eneberi: "Our Uhammiri will drown you in the lake. Our Okita will drown you in the Great River. From henceforth evil will continue to visit you" (216).

And when Ajanupu hits Eneberi with a mortar-pestle on the head, she effectively alerts Efuru to an alternate reality that doesn't include abusive marital relations. Efuru finally settles back into her father's house, where she achieves her own identity. When Difu, Efuru's friend, suggests that perhaps it is better she returned to her husband, Efuru's answer is telling: "Difu, it is not possible" (220). Instead, she sleeps soundly that night and dreams of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. "She [woman of the lake or Uhammiri] had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?" (221).

Nwapa's unanswered question, why do women worship Uhammiri although she never experienced motherhood, ends her novel and Efuru's story on an ambivalent note;

indeed, Uhammiri offers women wealth and beauty, but she can't give them children. Why then do they worship her? The answer could be that Uhammiri as a divine entity is represented in varying versions – she is a mother in her capacity as generator and consumer of life; her focus is to alleviate the suffering of women who don't conform to the expectations of their society and to offer beauty and wealth to her worshippers. Or it could be that there's more to being a woman. Women don't need to be confined to the body. As a goddess, she is about everything; about freedom without adhering to set rules and mores, about the collapse of binaries and the negation of linearity. As Uhammiri's worshipper, Efuru, with the aid of Ajanupu, demonstrates her freedom from arbitrary confinement and construction, and in significant ways, her life begins anew.

Just like Nwapa, Zimbabwean writer Vera too digs deep in the cultural milieu of her country to rescue ordinary women from invisibility. The history of Zimbabwe is informed by the protracted conflicts that date back in the 1800s when the British annexed vast areas of territory north of the Limpopo River in what was then known as Rhodesia. Angry at the invasion, the local people, the Ndebele and the Shona<sup>2</sup>, took up arms and waged the 1896-7 resistance known as the First Chimurenga, or revolutionary struggle. This struggle together with the liberation war of the 1970s form the backdrop of most of Vera's writing. By tracing this history, especially pinpointing the erasure of women's

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<sup>2</sup> Vera grew up in Bulawayo, the capital of Matabeleland in the southern part of Zimbabwe. Although most people here speak the Ndebele language, Vera, who was Shona could speak both languages. But while much of the liberation war took place in this area, and while this war forms the backdrop to Vera's writings, there's "not much evidence in Vera's writings which suggest that she adheres to any specific ethnic identification" (Bull-Christiansen 18).

contribution to the struggle, Vera furnishes insights into the expulsion and exploitation of the women and the general understanding of why men are seen as powerful patriarchs. For while it was women like Mbuya (grandmother) Nehanda Nyakasikana who were responsible for laying the foundation of a spiritual struggle against the intruders, women's contributions to the formation of contemporary Zimbabwean society were never acknowledged.

However, rather than focus heavily on the traditional Zimbabwean legends and images (as she does in her first novel *Nehanda*), to articulate the concerns of the women, Vera shifts her attention in her later novels, choosing to document the personal stories of contemporary women who do battle against imperialism and patriarchy, through semblances, as she seeks to subvert the linear or publicly authorized discourses in patriarchal and imperialist narratives. Her stories challenge the denial of Zimbabwean women's voices and identities – denials not only orchestrated by a male-dominated African society, but also by women who have become entrenched in the patriarchal mores. These stories give voice to the desires, challenges and experiences of female characters who have not had the advantage of writing or telling their stories as men have had in the public sphere.

An innovative sculptor as well as a writer, Vera explains that she's visually oriented and was largely influenced by film and photography, always inquiring into "how images are prepared, constructed and made to move" (Bryce 219). The ideological choice of images allows Vera to weave her stories around visual and mental moments that encompass the entire story. In *Without a Name* (published in 1994 and discussed later in the third chapter), the visual moment is when the protagonist, Mazvita, throws a child

over her left shoulder and onto her back. The gesture, as Vera explains to Jane Bryce in an interview, is a familiar scene in Africa that is carried out all the time (219). The difference here is that the child is dead. Vera explains: “This moment, frozen like that, is so powerful that I can’t lose sight of it, visually or emotionally. From it I develop the whole story, the whole novel: how do we get to this moment when the mother does this? Everything ripples around that, the story grows out of the image” (219).

Such a moment allows Vera to shatter the linear narrative, and in its place she focuses on what appear to be fragments of stories, ideas, thoughts, and images that circle around and accumulate to form the expression of the idea of African female subjectivity. In *Butterfly Burning* (published in 1998 and also discussed in the third chapter), the cinematic image is when the protagonist, Phephelaphi, performs an abortion in the forest. Vera captures the moment in an intense tone, reinforcing the challenges an African woman faces to construct herself a safe space. *Under the Tongue* (1996), the focus of this chapter, revolves around a moment of incest, when a father brutally molests his 10-year-old daughter. The action silences the child who retreats metaphorically “under her tongue”. Thus, as the writer addresses the concerns of generations of women whose minds and bodies have been raped, mutilated and silenced, it is within these ‘silenced’ spaces that she fashions an enduring consciousness that acts as a pathway for the women to claim their own bodies.

But it’s not an easy journey. To arrive at that fine space, where one is completely free of any domination, Vera explains, “it takes a long time for a woman to see that; that that is a place that she could aim towards and in fact reach. And when [she has] reached it, to find a most unexpected pleasure” (Primorac 160). For Vera, women don’t have to

necessarily succeed in their articulations; rather, it's the medium within which their thoughts are given a passage to be heard that matters. As she notes in "Open Spaces," "the woman writer in Africa is a witness; forgiving the evidence of the eyes, pronouncing her experience with insight, artistry and a fertile dexterity. Her response to theme, event, taboo is vital and pressing" (5).

*Under the Tongue*, for which Vera was awarded the 1997 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Africa, tells the story of 10-year-old Zhizha whose childhood memories are clouded by the unspeakable crime of incest committed by her father, Muroyiwa; a crime she can't articulate except in the only language she knows: "He put mucus there, and blood..." (228). Because Zhizha cannot comprehend the trauma, she loses her voice, and she can no longer speak. "I die in my sleep. My voice is held by the lingering shadow. I cannot speak. I lie inside stone" (123). The act of sexual abuse is represented in the form of Muroyiwa's voice, which haunts Zhizha in her sleep, thereby displacing her own voice. The novel is also about the betrayal of kinship ties as a result of the war. Zhizha's eventual invisibility and loss of voice even in the face of a strong desire to forget the crime, is underlined time and time again. "I call for grandmother but my voice sinks, disappears. I long for remembrance but a darkness grows on my forehead, buries my moment of birth" (209).

To capture the gravity of Zhizha's situation, Vera writes in a sparse and tight narrative whose economy contributes to the apparently bleak outlook of the story. Instead of hearing about the despair of a ten-year-old girl phrased eloquently and poetically over a span of pages, we simply get a lyrical text about a violent war that has disengaged the characters in unique ways. The novel relies on a fractured narrative and inner monologue

and makes no attempt at description. The most descriptive line we get, in fact, is the opening of the story, which, on its own, barely tells much: “A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock” (121). If, as Kizito Muchemwa notes, the “tongue” here is used to denote a metaphor for “voice, language and [...] power to articulate inner presence and to inscribe autobiography” (9), then Vera’s style, as might be expected of someone who is a sculptor, allows her to engage in an “anthropological rhetoric to create local color, [and] a unique cultural universe to exploit cultural paradigms” (10). When Zhizha fails to give voice and meaning to the repeated sexual violations by her father, she finds solace in the darkness that engulfs her inside, “where no one has visited; where it is warm like blood” (142). As a victim, she seeks, she questions and hopes that someone can put in words what her father has snatched from her and replaced with “mucus”. For Zhizha and her maternal grandmother, who also has been silenced by her society, retreating behind the tongue is experienced as a source of personal pain and confusion. Both must struggle to translate their pain into a resource.

Grandmother tells Zhizha:

Sometimes it is good to forget, to bury the heavy things of now, the thing which cannot be remembered without death becoming better than life.

Such things are for forgetting, for burying beneath the earth. But a woman must remember the moment of birth and death. (131)

However, by retreating “under the tongue,” Zhizha and the two generations of her maternal family will construct a site from which to imaginatively arrive at an understanding community that nurtures them through intimate and lived experiences. The narrator, comparing this strategy to the animal world, equates Zhizha’s silence to an

insect which uses its color as a shelter to merge, and to exist without any flamboyance of difference. “One had to be unremarkable, somehow, silent as death. It was necessary to be inseparable, to embrace torture, and despair and clouds of burning trees, to laugh a laugh that was also a fulfillment of fear” (167).

To many theorists and scholars,<sup>3</sup> giving voice is a necessary tool to empower marginalized groups. And where this is not possible, seen here in Vera’s traumatized, introverted and inarticulate protagonist, silence is viewed as a site of oppression and domination, a mark that shows that women are excluded from the public spheres of life. Paul Zeleza in particular introduces the concept of silence as cultural censorship. He writes that Zhizha “is distressed into the silence of powerlessness by the vicious masculinity of her own father, a man with his own troubled history” (14).

Patti Duncan puts the concept of silence into perspective: “Silence is not simply the absence of speech” (14), she writes. Rather, just as power is both a productive and prohibitive mode of agency, silence too can be productive and it should not be understood in opposition to speech but as a discourse that can effectively re-enact liberatory sites. Trinh T. Minh-ha also suggests in *Woman, Native, Other*, that the uses of silence as a form of difference can “undermine the very idea of identity” (372). She writes: “Within the context of women’s speech silence has many faces ... silence is

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<sup>3</sup> Meg Samuelson in a compelling study of *Under the Tongue* spends considerable time discussing the correlation between the search “for a language and voice to relate [the] experience of violation” (16) and the dilemma of an African culture that has its roots in orality. However, I do look at Zhizha’s silence for what it is; a silence that is an expression of her female agency or as Martina Kopf calls it, a “muteness,” which is a “long and passionate struggle for words, to name what happened and still happens” (249).

commonly set in opposition with speech as a will not to say or a will to unsay and as a language of its own has barely been explored” (372-73). Trinh continues to note that “silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right” (83). Patricia Lawrence also urges us to “recognize that there is a female tradition of writing ... that invites us to reread certain paradigms of silence and expression” (156). These observations acknowledge the fact that women in certain times and places are unable to speak openly, and as a result, revert to impregnable silences – silences that represent their different ways of feeling and knowing. Silence in this instance is seen as a way of saying the “unsayable.”

What Kopf, Duncan, Trinh and Lawrence are saying is that as readers, we need to understand the characters’ view of reality. If reality as Lawrence suggests, is perceived according to established patriarchal values, then women’s silences, viewed from the outside, are a mark of absence and powerlessness, given women’s modest expression in the public sphere. But if the same silence is viewed from the inside, and women’s experience and disposition of mind inform what is real, then women’s silence can be viewed as a presence, and as a text, waiting to be read (158).

By preserving this notion of silence in the character of Zhizha, Vera reverses the traditional notion of the African woman’s complicity in her oppression, and instead imbues her desire to keep quiet with a measure of “coded truth”. This silence, in other words, can be read as a “strategy of resistance and choice – a ritual of truth” (Lawrence 157). In many African traditions, children and women are often driven to the limits of what can be socially tolerated and once they recognize the fact, they withdraw into the

only available means – retreat into a private sphere since they are often excluded from the public sphere.

Talking about and grappling with sexual violence is an emotionally laden experience and in order for an individual to understand how to interpret and respond to an event, she must first appraise the experience – determine what is desirable and what is not. When an experience is named, it brings satisfaction and a sense of power and control to the victim. Vera uses the rape of Zhizha to address a longstanding tradition of violence committed against women. When Muroyiwa rapes his daughter, he steals “the light of the moon and its promises of birth” (31). Yet because of the war and its alienating effects, Muroyiwa too has been robbed of his own “light of the moon”. Muroyiwa is a striking figure who endures a life marked by powerlessness from his birth. The story goes that he was born in a calabash, from which he was assumed dead, before he awakened the following morning, thus attaining the name, Muroyiwa (Shona for “the bewitched one”). His family, especially the women, were unhappy at the turn of events, for “they were not joyous either; they preferred him not to live” (128).

Vera emphasizes such powerlessness when Muroyiwa resigns himself to his initial fate – that while he cheated death, “he could no longer escape from life” (128). To complicate his life further, Muroyiwa loses his brother to the war and his father is blinded as he tends to his fields. Through Muroyiwa, Vera suggests that parents who emerge from histories of oppression such as the colonial legacy can reproduce the degradation within their own families. Instead of providing for and protecting his daughter Zhizha and his wife, Runyararo, Muroyiwa escapes to the mountains looking for “something which was separate from the war” (176). Initially, the mountains offer him a reprieve from life’s

daily challenges, holding him in a “repose of sleep” (177). But later, nature itself turns against him, blinding him with a “surging darkness” (178). Discouraged with the unending war and seeing no hope on the horizon, Muroyiwa vents his anger against the powerless. When he recognizes his own failure in his daughter, Zhizha, as she sleeps in their one roomed house, he disrupts the kinship ties by raping her.

It is thus left to the community of women in Zhizha’s life to restore her sanity. Inspired by Grandmother’s insistence that “only words can bury us not silence” (315), Zhizha learns to listen and to dream; gestures that allow her to make her own text with female creativity and feminine force. Hers becomes a powerful story, an empowering story that examines the assaults on her body and her mind. She learns to “hide somewhere behind my eyes” and “remember” (134). In a highly drawn imagined reality, Vera makes Zhizha infuse her silence with a different psychological and cultural meaning. She is made to remember the darkness that befell her on that fateful day, but which darkness eventually gains a transformative power.

I remember the darkness and the night which have visited. I have to remember because the darkness has something to do with Grandmother being on the ground like this ... the inside of my head is not blue like morning though when I remember a blue like that it presses hard on my forehead and makes me cry. The inside of my head is wide. I know this from the pounding on both sides of my head. The inside of my head has swallowed darkness. Perhaps it is the sky which has entered me because sometimes I can see the morning rolled inside my head. (135)

In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray asks, “But what if the ‘object’ began to speak?” (35). Zhizha does “speak,” if we take as metaphor the “morning” that rolls in her head as speech. The morning symbolizes Zhizha’s desire to hold onto a vision of herself as a new day rolls in each morning. Vera reveals through Zhizha’s interior monologue what it means to lose a voice, but also what it means to take control through the making of one’s own reality. What we hear, listening to Zhizha is not a story of incest, but a tangle of struggle against a crime that could nearly destroy her. Some critics, like Primaroc, observe that it is highly improbable that a character like Zhizha is capable of articulating her thoughts (162). To counter the argument, Vera explains that her aim was to articulate the contradictions embedded in these women’s lives “to show the contradictions in their minds, the experiences which are ... kept down, which are in their minds” (162). In other words, Vera wanted her readers to get as close as possible to the experiences of her women characters.

Indeed, Zhizha as a child narrator has a limited point of view. But as she searches for a connection to the absolute loss she has suffered at the hands of her father, she draws on her grandmother’s wisdom, particularly the idea that it is better “to have many arms to carry your pain and no tongue with which to speak it” (173). In an intense process of questioning, probing and listening, Zhizha enables Grandmother too to open outlets she had long buried beneath her tongue. In the process of give and take, Zhizha is enabled to remember the fragmentary life she lived with her mother, Runyararo, before her mother was arrested for killing her husband, Zhizha’s father.

Mother calls to me in a voice just like mine, she grows from inside of me  
[...]. I change into me, and I say a e i o u. I remember all my letters. I tell

my mother and she repeats after me and I laugh then I repeat after mother who repeats after me and I after her ... I have turned into mother, and she laughs, because she has become me. letters flow from me to mother. My mother's voice is resonant and searching. She says we live with our voices rich with remembrance. We live with words. (162)

The memory allows Zhizha to articulate the story of violence and loss she had long buried under the tongue. As she recreates the traumatic experience, she constructs a meaning for herself through the communication process, as it allows her to shape herself. When Zhizha asks for a "humble silence" (165) through which she can be heard, it's as if Vera is invoking Monique Wittig's idea that speech is related to memory.

Wittig, writing in *Les Guerilleres*, urges women to remember, and if unable, then to rewrite the past: "You say you have listed all recollection of it, remember... you say there are no words to describe this time, you say it does not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or failing, that, invent" (89). Wittig equates the absence of memory to the absence of language. Though Zhizha has been rendered silent, buried under her tongue still remains a word – "Tonderayi," (Shona for one who remembers). Zhizha promises to keep the same word safe for her mother too, because as Grandmother says, "words are precious like drops of rain, like milk. Words can heal old wounds" (179). Zhizha's inner struggle and her effort to regain the necessary confidence to speak are vindicated when she finally whispers this word to her grandmother.

To Grandmother, "Tonderayi" opens the vaults of her memory and she moves from silence into speech. This act of speech, of letting the memory unfold becomes a gesture to meaningful words, and an expression that moves Grandmother from object to subject

through the liberated voice. She talks of the loss and trauma suffered when she gave birth to a son who never grew up. “When he arrived, all parts of him refused to grow except his head. His head grew and grew, a drop of rain that had lost the serene gift of flight, of its shimmering reflecting surface” (183). Unable to counter the assertions, and failing to rescue her son from his fate, Grandmother retreats into silence. She performs her subjectivity around the act of silence, burying her memory under the tongue to mitigate the unrelenting gaze from society’s censor. The achievement of a specifically silenced subjectivity, then, revolves around a process of choosing not to speak or to remember. “I buried him in the voice inside of my heart. He is the son of my ground” (193), Grandmother tells Zhizha.

However, it is not the deformity of Grandmother’s son that leads to her alienation from this society; rather, the collective incrimination of her husband’s rage and his relatives who construct the child’s deformity as evidence of Grandmother’s talent for untold evils. “They disguised their threats into repeated greetings, but I knew all their natural and acquired abilities for life denying exchanges” (193). By reconstituting the trauma felt at the hands of her relatives, and being aware of their pretence, Grandmother interrogates and reinterprets the community’s sanctioned behavior. Through her deconstruction of the violence that interweaves in her “punishment,” Grandmother negotiates her own participation in the discourse as she determines both her domestic experience and the shape of her narrative.

Grandmother’s tale reveals a relief that she has finally brought herself to relive the memories. Her voice here is associated with the power to read experience as though every nuance of tone and diction were symbolically suggestive and meaningful. Zhizha

especially takes pride in her grandmother's interpretive skills: "I know there is a wide lake in her memory, a lake in which ripples grow to the edges of the sky" (191). She feels both pride and love when Grandmother speaks, and when, as happens on a few occasions, Grandmother withdraws, turning inward to seek the meaning of experience, Zhizha gains pleasure, not pain. She knows that Grandmother turns inward to celebrate her power which allows Zhizha not to mourn the loss of attention.

As Zhizha celebrates the thinking person within the maternal persona, she restores the traditional grandmother whose role was limited to nurturing and sustaining others. Zhizha's identity formation here is structured through Grandmother's remembrance of her story, recalling the observation that "the telling of stories refreshes the mind as a bath refreshes the body; it gives exercise to the intellect and its powers; it tests the judgment and the feelings" (Froebel qtd in Horne 29). Furthermore, the relationship between the older generation and the third generation granddaughter who transmits the oral narrative is seen transforming cultural memory into a public sphere. By emphasizing the scenarios of telling ("Grandmother says" or "according to Grandmother" (160), Zhizha is able to break the hierarchies between her generation and that of her grandmother. Grandmother's special role here in the transmission of knowledge and thus Zhizha's identity formation secures the generational survival of the women based on their ability to cross borders between everyday life and their inner worlds.

While Grandmother's silence may indeed represent the refusal to participate in the process of subjugation, Runyararo, Zhizha's mother, channels her energies in other avenues. Her own silences cause her great suffering; having taken the law in her hands to kill her husband who has performed the despicable crime of incest on their daughter.

Runyararo (Shona for silence), refuses to inhabit the space that her name signifies, and instead creates and inhabits her own fiction, drawn out of oppression and years of poverty. She constructs the story of repression and disappointment and releases them into channels that make meaning for her. Her desire to frame a new living after prison propels her to see life in an ordered format, ordered through the lenses of her mind. Refusing to be confined in the one-roomed shack she shares with her mother and daughter, Runyararo decides on making mats which she sells through the dingy streets that make up the Dangambvura township – one of those bearing the brunt of war in Zimbabwe’s struggle for independence.

As Runyararo wanders through the narrow lanes of Dangambvura seeking customers, she enters a new fiction at this point – able to hear, smell and see the unbearable “smell of boiling cabbage in these narrow streets patterned with stale voices where something else, other than faith, had been resurrected. A whisper of fatality or something equally complete” (197). The descriptions and yearnings of the township become “the ceremonies which nurtured Dangambvura” (197) and in turn offer a coping mechanism for Runyararo to live another day as she sells her mats. For while devalued in an impoverished economy, Runyararo achieves a sort of victory; through her artistic inclination, she picks out the colors in a desolate Dangambvura as if they were “like a dream” (197).

By identifying herself with nature or its life cycle – she talks of peaches that will grow, ripen and produce “a bright white of seed that she liked to look at and know” (198) – Runyararo perversely appropriates an elevated image that allows her to transcend the extenuating circumstances. Her keen observation of the transformative capacity of nature

allows her to create and control her life, shielding her from becoming insane. Like her mother, Runyararo is marginalized by the symbolic order yet manages to subvert it. Asked how the women characters in her novels are different from the women characters of other African writers, Vera tells Primorac that it's because she can explore the women's worlds without romanticism. She says: "To have to understand the intimate complexity of their mental worlds, and their emotions, and to have explored their emotions and to have explored those moments of tragedy without, you know, withdrawing from them; without covering up" (166).

It is this thorough and rigorous study of the intimate details of women that allow Vera to infuse Runyararo with media through which she shapes and sculpts her. Runyararo knows how to weave mats, a skill she learned from her mother. "She [mother] said the mats could be made out of anything even the plastic bags they found scattered in the township. It was the making of the mat which was important, the symmetry of mats not their material" (189). Vera associates the meticulous weaving of the mat with Runyararo's desire to order her chaotic life into a meaningful structure. As Runyararo undertakes the process to weave a mat, she self-consciously creates a safe space through which she inhabits a community that seeks to limit her. She negotiates between the fictions, living a public life as a former prison convict, in full view of a condemning societal gaze and a private life that is nonetheless disruptive in so far as it gives meaning to her life.

She held ... the mat secure near her breast like something precious so she could examine her thread, what she had created: the symmetry of mats.

She would spread the mat on the ground and flatten it, her eyes moving

devotedly over the cloth, she would touch every part, searching, removing loose threads, pressing away the unevenness. (190)

That Runyararo is endowed with artistic skills that function as a mode of resistance is not surprising coming from Vera. In her dissertation, *The Prison of Colonial Space*, Vera studies a prison narrative, *117 Days*, in which the author meticulously “stitches” and “sews” her calendar as she marks off the days, weeks, and months of her prison confinement. Vera reads in this act of “stitching” skills that conjure “the women’s world [that is] usually made subservient to the official public sphere” (204). This skill is “tantamount to providing an improvisational response to chaos; it constitutes survival strategy and motion in the face of dispersal” (Baker and Pierce 309).

Just like quilting, which was adopted by African Americans displaced from their ancestral lands during the slave trade in order to reconstruct new identities, weaving mats works for the African woman as a story of her inner soul through which she gives credence to her existence. When Runyararo and her mother find some true material for making mats, it is a blessing because then, “their fingers folded into the substance of memories” (190). Weaving hence offers them an opportunity to imagine an original place, one that is as far removed from the daily realities of Dangambvura where neighbors could hear each other snore, fight, and dream (190).

As my examination of the two novels suggests, “safe spaces” are central to women’s fiction. The narrative strategies, styles and tones might differ, but in both *Efuru* and *Under the Tongue*, the “safe spaces” allow women to exercise their subjectivity. In these spaces, they abandon the passive roles to which they have been confined by the dominant patriarchal system. In this way, the spaces not only open channels for a more authentic

expression of female identity, but also affect a critique of the normalized ways of life. The ethereal re-inscription of Efurú into a goddess priestess suggests that the goddess symbolism can be used to transgress domination. The goddess priestess liberates women from the burdens of conventional motherhood, while enabling them to control and enjoy the benefits of female friendship and the virtues of choice. Vera's novel portrays the problematic as well as the celebratory aspects of "silence" as a safe space, in which the main character, Zhizha, awakens to her voice fostered by the loving nurturance of her grandmother to re-evaluate both the concept of speech and silence. As Zhizha contemplates the various influences that culminate in her identity, she rejects the darkened world that her father's incest had occasioned. As we follow Runyararo through the streets of Dangambvura selling her mats, we witness a resurgence of the human spirit. Similarly, Grandmother's ability to voice her life story allows her to recognize the injustices perpetuated by her relatives. In the end, she unravels the positive elements of her life, especially when she draws on the feminine spaces which she had suppressed within herself.

## Chapter Two

### Finding Voice, Writing Self in

#### Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1979)

In pre-colonial Africa, when women were restricted to the margins, and denied a voice in their societies, they appropriated for themselves the role of oral performers and disseminators of cultural beliefs in their communities. They became, as Obioma Nnameka notes, “composers who, sometimes transformed and re-created an existing body of oral traditions in order to incorporate woman centered perspectives” (*From Orality* 138). The oral tradition validated the women’s existence and allowed them to articulate their experiences in expressions that were available to them. As we saw in Chapter One with Nwapa’s *Efuru*, the re-conception of the oral motifs such as the goddess symbolism was an avenue through which women gained special recognition in society. But not all societies had a tradition of oral motifs as Nwapa’s society, and what’s more, even where the tradition existed, often the oral narratives were dismissed as powerless and ineffective, partly because the critiques they posed seemed ineffective in face of the powerful male discourse. In fact, while the power of the women’s oral narratives solidified their community kinship ties, with time, especially with the transition from orality to literature, “a uniquely male literary tradition emerged, based upon the knowledge of the colonizers’ language and privileged the men by erasing any meaningful female presence” (Nnaemeka 138).

In this chapter, I explore how Senegalese writer, Mariama Ba, in her award winning novel, *So Long A Letter*, takes the leap from her predecessors' practice of telling the woman's story from the oral tradition, to telling it in a written format, signifying the act of writing as a cultural negotiation in which the woman asserts her own agency by contesting the social agenda that figures her socially prescribed role as simply a wife and mother. By taking up the act of writing, Ba puts into a framed and contained space a record of lived experiences that ultimately contribute to a recognizable self.

Concentrating on how the writer deploys the culture of writing women back into the public arena, the chapter reveals a unique human experience that is contextualized within the broader African woman's history and heritage. The complex relationships between Senegalese women and men in a Muslim culture are analyzed in an attempt to understand how the women have been denied an active part in the formation of their subjectivity.

Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido trace the emergence of a female literary tradition in Africa to Adelaide Casely-Hayford's "Mista Courifer," a short story published in 1961 that enacts the drama between African and Western aspects of culture. But as the authors point out, Casely-Hayford's privileged social status, mixed race - she was of Fanti (Sierra Leone) and British heritage - and international travel, gave her special perspectives on her society (315). The rest of the African women folk had not yet had the opportunities to leap from the traditional enclaves that had allowed them some power as priestesses or oral performers to writers because not only did they lack a literary culture to follow, but many had not gone to school. When they finally started writing in the 1970s, they faced new concerns such as a plausible literary genre that would best reflect their social and cultural experiences.

When writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Laretta Ngcobo, Mariama Ba, Miriam Tlali, Nafissatou Diallo and Aminata Saw Fall started writing, they struggled with the idea of genre in which to articulate their concerns. For many, telling their own stories in form of autobiography was the easiest way because it afforded them an arena in which to self-examine their lives, even if, as Ama Ata Aidoo says, this came at a cost:

Most certainly my trials as a woman writer are heavier and more painful than any I have to go through as a university teacher ... you feel awful for seeing the situation the way you do, and terrible when you try to speak about it ... yet you have to speak out, since your pain is also real, and in fact the wound bleeds more profusely when you are upset by people you care for, those you respect. (262)

Aidoo is aware that the very act of writing one's life story provides the space for personal authority and reckoning. But at the same time, she is aware of the implications of baring one's personal life to criticism. Aidoo's concerns are echoed by Ba who sought to champion an existence of a women's literary tradition, no matter how marginal it was on the continent.

Speaking at a Symposium in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1980, Ba, the first African woman to write an epistolary novel, equates the function of the African writer to that of a "freedom fighter" (413). She explains that the intellectual writer, reeling from the negative stereotype of the African in the colonialist literature, "had to put the skills he derived from his status to the service of his people, since he enjoyed such privileges as direct contact with the colonizer, knowledge of his language and understanding of the

strategy of domination” (413). But Ba observes, even more than the male writer, the African woman writer’s mission is “special” since “the African social context is marked by glaring gender inequalities, exploitation, and ageless barbaric oppression of the so-called weaker sex” (415). The fact that women were signified as the weaker sex required the African woman writer to “plot” them in innovative genres that would attempt to transgress and reconstruct this image.

Ba was born in an elite Dakar family in Senegal in 1929. But because she lost her mother at a young age, she was raised by her maternal grandparents, who at first were against her education at the French colonial school. However, her father, who was a politician and civil servant, insisted that his daughter attend the Ecole Normale de Rufisque, a training institution for future teachers near Dakar, from which she graduated in 1947. Ba’s privileged upbringing notwithstanding, she presents a picture of African life that is defined by successive struggles and hard-won triumphs, trials and victories that are specific to a woman’s experience. For instance, her characters are portrayed negotiating a Senegalese culture of codes and roles, often feeling the intense split between a social self formed by external expectations and a private self formed by internal desires, needs and dreams.

Certain aspects of the Senegalese society set the context for such a negotiation. First, in the Muslim society in which Ba is writing, men are required at their first marriages to declare whether they intend to be monogamous or polygamous. Should they declare intentions of being polygamous, they are reminded of the Qur’anic requirement that they are of sound financial standing at the occasion of taking a second wife and promise to dispense equity and justice to all the wives. In practice, however, this is rarely

followed and there are no sanctions against men who change their minds. Instead, one becomes polygamous because he is a devout Muslim, as well as a status symbol. Thus, when Modou Fall, the protagonist's husband in *So Long A Letter* decides to take on a second wife, he invokes God's will, noting that God intended him to have other wives and there was nothing he could do about it (37). The women on the other hand, are never given a chance to express their desires at the time of the wedding; instead, when their husbands take on other wives, they are expected to embrace the new members of the family. Because Ba recognizes a perceived sense of dissatisfaction and a painful lack of self in these practices, she embraces the act of writing to create a space that narrates the self into a single voice. She chooses the epistolary form because for her, the genre allows the women to abandon the collective subjectivities they had strategically defined and valued in their oral traditions so as to enter into the written discourse.

The epistolary genre traces its origins to eighteenth century England, when, as Dena Goodman says, "the practice of letter writing became a dominant practice through which men and women communed with one another." But more than the men, who had access to the public realm, women took up the act of writing letters because it accorded them spaces of privacy through which they "articulated a gendered subjectivity by which they understood themselves both as individuals and women and struggled with the cultural contradictions they had to confront as gendered subjects" (Goodman 12). Because of the inter-subjective space of this kind of correspondence, the women constructed a safe space, using language to document themselves on a blank space that a letter provides.

Historian Michel de Certeau writes that the blank page of a letter is a “space of its own that delimits a place of production for the subject” (134). For de Certeau, then, the “island of the page” becomes a transitional place in which an “industrial inversion is made: what comes in is something ‘received,’ what comes out is a ‘product’” (135). Like Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* in which de Certeau reads Robinson “conquering the task of writing his Island” (135), women writers construed writing as the means through which they could confront the complexities and ambivalences that their cultures placed upon them. In a dialogic engagement with culture and religion, the women struggled to constitute a voice of their own subjectivity, to emerge from a past dominated by restrictive obligations into a present articulated by new forms of expression.

Articulating a poetics of woman centered narratives, feminist scholar Susan Lanser writes that the entry of women into writing seriously threatens the prevailing patriarchal hegemonies, just as the emergency of “print culture” challenged other hierarchies of caste and class by providing an oppositional vehicle for literate persons without other access to power. “Not only does print allow women publically to challenge the terms of their own domination, but once they are identified as discursive ‘I’s, such women become ‘individuals’ occupying positions of privileged-class men” (Intro 26). The articulation of this discursive “I” constitutes a coming into voice, for those people or groups of people who espouse a woman centered point of view. Thus, as Lanser notes, when feminists speak of literary characters who refuse to be proscribed within the patriarchal logos, they designate the gesture as finding voice, whether or not that voice is represented textually (4).

Adrienne Rich, like Lanser, believes that the entire history of women's struggle for self determination has been muffled in silence over and over (11). This notwithstanding, it is also a fact that women's culture is active. "Women have been the truly active people in all cultures, without whom human society would long ago have perished" (13). For Rich, women must question everything, remember what has been forbidden and come "together telling our stories, to look afresh at, and then to describe for ourselves ... the moon landscape embossed with the booted print of a male foot" (13-14).

The "male foot" that Rich talks about takes a special signification in Africa where the very act of writing can make or break a woman's destiny. As Ba notes,

As women, we must take the future in our own hands in order to overthrow the status quo which harms us and to which we must no longer submit... Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon... we no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with mother Africa. (qtd in McElany-Johnson 119)

Ba suggests that writing in the context of the Third World woman is more than a text of the oppressed which they use to articulate one's experience; rather, it becomes a way of testifying to the oppression and empowering of a collective subjectivity through cultural inscription and recognition. Janet Gurkin Altman, writing in "Graffigny's Epistemology and the Emergence of Third-World Ideology" notes that unlike the male created epistolary heroines in Western literature, like Pamela and Clarissa who organize their narratives around the men in their lives, epistolary heroines in black women's literature

like Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are more concerned with creating "moments of mold-breaking ferment," moments that occur primarily between black women, altering the "relations between the sexes, classes and races" (174). These moments, according to Altman, revolve around the actions of healing and creating, constituting a possibility of daily living, survival, and pleasure. Lindsey Tucker, also looking at the unique style in which African American women writers have to address themselves, notes that women's self creation is "influenced, impeded, constrained by language that has embedded in it the codes by patriarchal culture" (81). For the black woman writer then, the search for voice, for the rescue of her subjectivity from the sometimes subtle, yet always pervasive, dictates of the dominant culture becomes even more problematic.

The epistolary space then becomes a measure of control for the collectively and personally silenced. In "Speaking in Tongues," Mexican-American feminist writer Gloria Anzaldua especially advocates for epistolary writing noting that because writing doesn't come easily for women of color, the letter, with its personal address, has the capacity to bridge the invisibility which these women face in both the European colonial and patriarchal worlds that women writers like Ba protest. She writes:

I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself, to make myself, to achieve autonomy. To dispel the myths that I am a mad prophet or a poor suffering soul. To convince myself that I am worthy and that what I have to say is not a pile of shit. To show that I can and I will write,

never mind their admonitions to the contrary. And I will write about the unmentionables, never mind the gasp of the censor and the audience. (187)

In this quotation, Anzaldua pays attention to the complex and nuanced third world feminist usages of the epistolary space, thereby enacting a performative manifesto for women writers of color, urging them to cast aside their inhibitions and realize that “the act of writing is the act of making soul, alchemy. It is the question for the self, for the center, for the self, which we women of color have come to think as “other” – the dark, the feminine” (187). Anzaldua seeks to legitimate and provide insight into the complexities of those people whose selves and lived experiences render visible any misrepresentations. Anzaldua turns against the white feminist idea by Virginia Woolf that seeks a room of one’s own before one can write. Instead, she implores women of color to listen to their inner voices and write from every crevice of space they can muster. “Write in the kitchen, lock yourself in the bathroom. Write on the bus or the welfare line, on the job, or during meals, between sleeping or waking” (189) because in the very act of writing lies “our survival ... because a woman who writes has power. And a woman with power is feared” (190).

*So Long a Letter* heeds Anzaldua’s injunction for survival and appropriation of power. As an intriguing literary hybrid, the novel focuses on the emotional growth and self realization of the protagonist, Ramatolaye, whose husband, Modou Fall, has just died when the novel begins. Ramatolaye is a woman whose life has been dominated by male figures and on the occasion of her husband’s death she writes a long letter to her dear friend Aissatou with whom she shares the experience of abandonment by their husbands once they acquired new wives. The novel, which appeared in 1979, was received with

such critical acclaim from critics in both Africa and the Western world that it was awarded the Noma Prize, “a prize for black Africa” (Harrell-Bond 396). Florence Stratton hails the book as a text that “rewrites the text of what is acceptable for women” (147), while Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi believes it is a great groundbreaking feminist text (108-9). Ba herself attributes the novel’s success to the fact that it reiterates a “cry from the heart of all women everywhere” (Harrell-Bond 396). Written in form of a letter, the novel allows the protagonist, silenced and marginalized Ramatolaye, to document the constraints placed upon women and their desire to dislodge these constraints, as they imagine a more equitable gender system.

Ramatolaye, a school teacher in her 50s, is trying to fend for her twelve children and at the same time cope with having to share her husband of 30 years with a 19-year-old co-wife. Not only is the new wife, Binetou, younger, but she is a classmate of Ramatolaye’s oldest daughter, Daba. Ramatolaye writes of the neglect and sense of betrayal the new events cause her. But as she writes, she learns to deal with her sorrows – her expulsion from the marital sphere – and takes solace in the fact that her friend Aissatou went through the same torment but that her “stoicism” made her “not violent or subversive but [a] true hero[ine], unknown in the mainstream of history, never uplifting established order” (11). The pleasure Ramatolaye takes in this act seems to derive from primary memories of the bond she has had with Aissatou in the past, when, as young students, they roamed the countryside and reveled in their youth. In this sense, Ramatolaye’s writing confirms the association of written texts with an original voice, because the letter serves to constitute Aissatou’s presence.

Unlike Ramatoulaye, who's abandoned for a younger wife strictly because of her husband's indiscretions, Aissatou's case is more complicated. Aissatou traces her lineage from a lower caste of society, the goldsmiths, while her husband Mawdo Ba is from the upper class. Despite the differences in status, however, Mawdo Ba had uplifted his wife "to his own level" because his mother's objections to Aissatou "did not frighten him" (19). In addition, while Aissatou's mother-in-law "planned her revenge" (20) against her for marrying into their perceived high class society, Aissatou's intelligence and education confer upon her a sense of confidence that allows her to reject this phallogocentric culture by renouncing her husband when he agrees to marry a younger wife. In a telling passage from a letter she writes to Mawdo Ba, Aissatou reflects upon her sense of self, creating a metaphor for a perception of subjectivity and vocation. She refuses to be confined within her mother-in-law's and husband's language, which silences women from the lower caste.

Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties. 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had. (31)

Writing the letter also allows Aissatou to reject the institution of polygamy when her husband marries young Nabou, who is expected to "return the royal blood to its source" (21). "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way" (2). As a single mother, Aissatou defiantly focuses on books that grant her what society had denied, for they become her redeeming acts of

volition. The books generate new possibilities, taking her to the School of Interpreters, from which she graduates to attain a position at the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. Rejecting the culture of subjugation that Mawdo represents, a culture that allows him to accept a second wife, he says he only “tolerated for reasons to duty” (32), Aissatou claims her life in the United States. The willful decision to leave Mawdo signals for Aissatou a break with the past and a rejection of cultural domination.

As the critical and complex portrayal of Ramatoulaye and Aissatou demonstrates, Ba’s fiction investigates not only the class system in Senegalese society, but offers a scathing criticism of the institution of polygamy that circumscribes women’s lives within specific cultural subtexts. Historically, in many parts of Africa, the institution of polygamy was an acceptable form of marriage prior to the arrival of the colonialists and Christianity. But because the practice is riddled with controversy, today, women are critical of what they see as the dire consequences of polygamous marriages, such as competition for scarce resources, confusion, and the general unhappiness that accrues from these relationships. Fatima Mernissi, writing in *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* notes the psychological impact on both women and men in polygamous families: “It [polygamy] enhances men’s perception of themselves as primarily sexual beings and emphasizes the sexual nature of the conjugal unit. Moreover, polygamy is a way for the man to humiliate the woman as a sexual being; it expresses her inability to satisfy him” (48). The psychological torture associated with the institution of polygamy then necessitates the formation of a sisterhood through avenues like friendship. Ramatoulaye’s ability to question what would otherwise be her lot in life and break with the expected passive acceptance of her husband’s decision to get a second wife is made

possible by her friendship with Aissatou. Unlike the inequality between Ramatolaye and Modou Fall, Ramatolaye and Aissatou's relationship is reciprocal and enhances emotional healing.

But more than the institution of polygamy as the cause of both Ramatolaye and Aissatou's anguish, the two are highly educated women and significantly pose a threat to the men in their societies. We are told that both were "the first pioneers of the promotion of African women" (14), having been led to this path by the European missionaries who helped free them from the "frustrating taboos" of their societies and made them capable of "discernment" (16). In this context, the two women exemplify that with knowledge, women may be as effective as men. But in Ba's society, women who receive an education pose a threat because they have the capability to disrupt the status-quo of the traditional community. As Vanessa Maher writes, "this is especially true in the case of women for the value system which reserves the 'public sphere' for men and excludes women from it also requires the training of women to be entirely domestic so that they are unemployable and economically dependent" (73). Women, then, find themselves in an awkward position, having to rely on men for economic support because the "idea of reducing the economic and political dependence of women on their husbands, fathers or brothers seems to present an intolerable threat to the status-quo" (Maher 84). This adherence is regarded as an obligation toward society's undertakers who embody a tradition on which both social position and identity are based. To flaunt this position is tantamount to becoming a "devil" (15) as both Ramatolaye and Aissatou are deemed by society.

“Dear Aissatou, I have received your letter. By way of reply, I am beginning this diary, my prop in my distress. Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain” (*So Long* 1). This opening moment is significant for Ramatolaye because it gives her the impetus to take an inward journey and reflect on her entire life, holding herself up to examination, but most importantly, highlighting the pivotal moments that would serve as a mirror to the younger generation of women. The writing of the letter comes to Ramatolaye inadvertently, for under normal circumstances, she would never have found the time nor the peace of mind to write it. As are all widows in Senegal, Ramatolaye is forced into a four month and ten-day mourning period with no contact with the outside world, and it’s through the observance of this ritual that she is provided with some quiet time to reflect and solidify her friendship with Aissatou. Through the act of writing, she reflects on the life she has led with Modou Fall; she explains why she mourns him in death, even while her in-laws strip her of property and dignity and she also highlights the reasons she stayed in his house all those years Modou Fall had neglected her.

The letter thus becomes for Ramatolaye a ritual place in which she makes visible what she values. Through the selection of images and memoirs, the letter begins to define for Ramatolaye what is consequential, valuable, and suitable as evidence of her life. “I conjure you up”; “my friend, my friend, my friend. I call on you three times” (1). This sense of urgency, a desire for a witness, an ally to her sufferings prompted by her intense feeling of loss permeates the letter.

Ramatolaye valorizes the act of writing as a construction that, created through selection, interpretation and preservation, works to bridge the distance and create an

imagined existence. To write in her seclusion, thus, becomes a means of creation. This appropriation of space and self representation becomes for Ramatolaye a form of insurgency. She gains the voice to criticize her sisters-in-law who demand that she take care of them as if she were married to them. She narrates the pain a woman goes through when subjected to society's gaze when she steps out of her proscribed space and goes to school: "we were scaling the heights, but your mother-in-law, who saw you resplendent beside her son ... thought more and more of her revenge" (25). With the imagined support of Aissatou, Ramatolaye conjures up an alternative mode of expression that is reminiscent of the matriarchal communities in Africa when women would gather around the hearth to hear stories that aimed at subverting the patriarchal logos. The resultant bond of friendship between Ramatolaye and Aissatou hence becomes a culturally transgressive endeavor full of carefully narrative disclosures of hitherto untold secrets and yearnings. As Shari Coulis notes:

Even though Ramatolaye and Aissatou choose different responses to the attempt to subjugate them, they retain a friendship and respect that endures. Their bond transcends distance and all differences and is the core of the narrative ... *So Long a Letter* seems a metaphor for the sisterhood Ramatolaye and Aissatou forged in childhood, modified throughout many years together and apart, and continues to offer substance and support to them both. (32)

While Ramatolaye doesn't arrange the material in chronological order, the letter allows her to define not only what is memorable but also how it is to be remembered.

Ramatolaye tells Aissatou of the death of her husband Modou, "Modou Fall is indeed

dead, Aissatou. The uninterrupted procession of men and women who have ‘learned of it, the wails and tears all around me, confirm his death’ (3); she describes Modou’s wake as a “ceremony for the redemption of a soul” (6) and simultaneously uses feminist discourse to appropriate and re-inscribe the funeral ceremony as she laments the rituals that rob every Senegalese woman of her “personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her” (4).

The letter, as the signifier of her memory becomes linked to Ramatolaye’s identity formation, since, as Keith Walker observes, the epistle, in particularly feminist terms, “promotes bonding between the correspondents who share their secrets, intimate fears, aspirations, and political agenda” (253). Because the letter permits the enunciation of a people’s social history, it becomes especially a viable vehicle for women who can now articulate their thoughts, “voicing a feminist perspective on politics, trivia, tangential realities, digressions, and, psycho-analytically, the transcription of stream of consciousness and, ultimately, the liberation of the subconscious and the unconscious self – the Other” (Walker 253). The letter then becomes a singular self-reflection culminating in the sustenance and preservation of a marginalized identity. On the fortieth day after her husband’s death, Ramatolaye announces to Aissatou that she has forgiven him, a decision she reaches after measuring the extent of his betrayal. “I have forgiven him,” she writes, “May God hear the prayer I say for him every day” (57). Despite having written a few pages earlier that she had lived in bitterness following her husband’s betrayal, the reflection upon her life leads her to the understanding that “life is an eternal compromise” (72).

Jeanne Perreault writes that the process of self writing makes the female body of she who says “I” a site and source of written subjectivity, “investing that individual body with the shifting ethics of a political, racial, and sexual consciousness” (2). In other words, by embarking on the process of writing, the narrative act becomes an emancipation project for both Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, where their subjectivity and agency are reshaped, while at the same time, they re-inscribe “the possibility, experience, and value of being a “self”” (4). When Ramatoulaye writes that she has forgiven Modou Fall, her husband, she shares her experiences with others in a distinctive voice that bears the traces of suffering but at the same time make her a prototype of the female self writer. The anger at Modou’s betrayal - “what inner torment led Modou Fall to marry Binetou?” (12) - sorrow, regret and loneliness find an outlet in the final product, the text that re-inserts Ramatoulaye back into culture by giving her a personal voice that speaks beyond itself.

As Ramatoulaye writes her text, she becomes a text herself, a signifying sign that Henry Louis Gates calls a “privileged text,” that the epistolary narrative “allows in terms of identification with a character, precisely because the devices of empathy and distance, standard in the third-person narration, no longer obtain” (246). Thus this act of writing becomes for Ramatoulaye a deliberate and desperate determination to subvert the status-quo reinforcing Anzaldua’s idea that creative acts are forms of “political activism employing definite aesthetic strategies for resisting dominant cultural norms” (*Making Face* xxiv).

When Ramatoulaye invokes Aissatou as a witness, she repairs the broken threads of her life. Hers becomes a journey that is backward looking, allowing her to see what

has shaped her. As Mary Daly says of women who invent and create themselves, the act of remembering the past makes it possible for them not only to “grasp the distortions of the patriarchal “past,” but also to see through and beyond the “distorting mirrors, to move through the looking-glass world of double feel/double think/double dream into the background” (350). In looking back, Ramatolaye seeks a knowledge and a tradition that has sustained her ancestors. She reminds Aissatou of the golden days when, spurned by the entire community because they were the pioneers in the women’s movement, they nonetheless endured the ostracism and labored on in their chosen careers because, as she says, they had many dreams to accomplish (15). She muses on their tenuous position as educated women, saying the status led men to refer to them as “scatter-brained,” while others labeled them “ devils” even if, they wanted to “possess” them at the same time (15). But most importantly, she pays tribute to the European missionaries who lifted them “out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own” (15). Thus, despite the past’s significance, she does look at it through critical lenses. She refuses to reclaim a tradition that reinforces patriarchal ways, making her identity and subject formation a result of a combination of factors as she interrogates family, social, culture, history and memory in an effort to piece together the sources of her identity.

While the ritual of sequestering a mourning widow certainly empowers Ramatolaye, it at the same time denies her an essential space to construct her identity in relation to her community. Roz Ivanic theorizes that by aligning our values, goals and discourse with our communities, we construct an identity that reflects our association with those groups. She argues that we “negotiate an identity with the range of

possibilities for selfhood which are supported or at least tolerated by the community” (82), possibilities that represent the community’s values and norms. Because Ramatolaye is suddenly alienated from the rest of society, the identity that she had projected to fit into the community is imperiled because she cannot continue actively participating in the group. She therefore turns to the site of memory. Gayle Green refers to memory as a “shaper and shape shifter,” a construct that “takes liberties with the past as artful and lying as any taken by the creative writer” (294). Memory, continues Green, “revises, reorders, refigures, resignifies; it includes or omits, embellishes or represses, decorates or drops, according to imperatives of its own” (294).

For Ramatolaye, recollecting and remembering are a means of assembling, of bringing together lived experiences so they would make sense. “If over the years, and passing through the realities of life, dreams die, I still keep intact my memories, the salt of remembrance,” Ramatolaye writes.

I conjure you up. The past is reborn, along with its procession of emotions.  
I close my eyes. Ebb the tide of feelings: ... I close my eyes. Ebb the tide  
of images ... where the past begets the present ... cross-sections of my life  
sprint involuntarily from my memory, grandiose verses from the known,  
noble words of consolation fight for my attention. (1)

This space, which Ramatolaye evokes by closing her eyes becomes an “internalized world inhabited by her souvenirs” (Nnaemeka 14). Nnaemeka also notes that the images in this interior space are unified from a cacophony of initially fragmented rituals and ideology, which Ramatolaye transforms through the “mediation of emotions and sensations” (15).

The strength of Ramatolaye's voice seen in the way she persists in offering an ongoing feminist analysis of her alienated self is further enforced when she refuses to marry her brother-in-law Tamsir Fall. As a middle-aged widow, who has no older sons to provide for her well-being, Ramatolaye is expected to marry Tamsir Fall her brother-in-law as is the custom. Tamsir's sense of manly arrogance is seen when he proposes to Ramatolaye:

Tamsir speaks with great assurance; he touches, once again, on my years of marriage, then he concludes: 'When you have "come out" (that is to say, of mourning), I shall marry you. *You suit me as a wife*, and further, you will continue to live here, just as if Modou were not dead... *you are my good luck*. I shall marry you. I prefer you to the other one, too frivolous, too young. I advised Modou against that marriage'. (57; emphasis mine)

It is at this precise moment that Ramatolaye's voice, which has "known thirty years of silence" (57) breaks out and she turns down the marriage offer, noting that she would never be the one to complete Tamsir's collection (58). Ramatolaye's decision is a major feminist breakthrough that prompts Mariama Ba to defend her in an interview. In Senegal, it is an established fact that when a husband dies, his widow is obliged to marry his younger brother. Ba explains that Ramatolaye's decision to turn down Tamsir is driven by the understanding that Tamsir wants to marry her for his own selfish purposes. "She, the widow, has grown children who are working and have financial means ... He does not come to offer help. He only comes for his own selfish interests, for his own benefit" (Harrell-Bond 394).

Ba, together with a new generation of African women writers, is conscious of the importance of creating new avenues of feminine awareness. But because these writers are still products of their society's cultural milieu, they anchor their projects, not in gender confrontation, but in an internalization of women's uncharted realms to emerge with a feminine subjectivity that is constructed through a practice of subverting the patriarchal logos. By clarifying that Ramatolaye is free to reject Tamsir because his intentions were selfish, Ba constructs a feminine centered space that springs from a defiance and transformation of the patriarchal system from within. This strategy echoes Luce Irigaray's concept of shaking the patriarchal model in *This Sex that is not One*. Discussing a creation of a feminine space, Irigaray proposes a different mode of enunciation, based neither on a subject-object binary opposition, nor on the inherited patterns of thought that regard women as "lack" or a "negative image of the subject" (78) but one that is predicated on the disrupting of the phallogocentric conception of truth. Irigaray writes:

...women do not aspire simply to be men's equals in knowledge. They do not claim to be rivaling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take onto the logic as its model, but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the economy of the logos.

*(This Sex 78)*

The visit from Tamsir and his marriage proposal allow Ramatolaye to question her society's construction of truth that is predicated on a widow being inherited. She is reminded of the moment when her husband conspired to get himself a second wife without her knowledge. She remembers the moment when Tamsir, together with the

village priest, announced the news that her husband, Mawdo Fall, had married a second wife since fate which decrees man's decisions had ensured so. From a memory of a wrong that the men had forgotten, Ramatolaye remembers and talks: "Thus I took my revenge for that other day when all three of them had airily informed me of the marriage of Mawdou Fall and Binetou" (58). Ramatolaye's newly gained territory and her rediscovery of subjectivity springs from an ambiguity between respect for tradition and a profound repulsion against being oppressed. Her language is born out of pain, victimization and then resistance.

However, from society's point of view, Ramatolaye's freedom from conventional social restraint, her firm and articulate mode of address to Tamsir, even her competent forays into the traditionally masculine role of running a house are seen as violating the norms of conventional femininity. The tragic consequences of her determined will to marry no man places her in the vengeful and determining gaze of society – especially as seen in the remonstrations from the society's undertakers. The village priest condemns Ramatolaye for speaking out against Tamsir's proposal and invokes God as a witness to her profanity (58). The griot or praise singer, Farmata, believes that she has sinned against religion by turning down Dauda Dieng, the second suitor, and that God will punish her for not following the path towards peace. "You have refused greatness," Farmata tells Ramatolaye, "you shall live in mud" (69). In addition, Farmata appropriates society's disciplinary powers to control a woman's body, when she berates Ramatolaye for failing to take into account her advanced age: "Who do you take yourself for? At fifty, you have dared to break the *wolere*" (69). By placing a limit to the age at which a woman can afford to choose a suitor, Farmata reveals a sexism that operates in this

society. Analyzing the disciplinary practices that produce feminine bodies, Sandra Lee Bartky speaks of a regulatory regime that perpetually and exhaustively surveys a “body’s size and contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and general comportment in space and appearance of each of its visible parts” (80). The fact that Farmata is obliged to note Ramatolaye’s “advanced age” shows that a middle-aged woman’s experiences are still controlled within the confines of the aesthetic pleasures of a masculine logos.

Thus, through the griot’s gaze and surveillance, Ramatolaye’s acts of resistance become appropriated by the disciplinary techniques that re-inscribe her in a discourse of femininity that implies confrontation over a woman’s power. Her attempt at a psychological emancipation is thus presented as always subject to the operations of a disciplinary power that function by attaching individual women to a pre-conceived social control. She is constantly called to order and her attempts to deviate from the expected cultural norms are swiftly condemned.

However, as Judith Butler has suggested in *Gender Trouble*, even if the subject may be culturally constructed, or enmired, “it is nevertheless vested with an agency, usually figured as the capacity for reflexive mediation, that remains intact regardless of cultural embeddedness” (141). The depth of this “reflexive meditation” becomes more pronounced depending on the degree of alienation from the subject’s prior experiences which then form the basis for change. For Ramatolaye, the ability to articulate an understanding of her lived experiences is mostly enforced by her educational background in a society where very few women are given the opportunity to go to school.

The “reflexive meditation” occasioned by the recognition that she has been dealt a hard blow by her husband and society at large becomes the fertile breeding ground for

her rebellion. This sense of understanding allows her to reject the second suitor Daouda Dieng, who proposes to make her his second wife. In a fit of unrestrained passion, Ramatolaye tells Dieng in a letter that she wouldn't willingly become his second wife because she knows the trauma his first wife will go through, the same trauma she experienced when her first husband married a second wife. She writes: "abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family" (68) and to Aissatou, she confesses, "once more, I was refusing the easy way because of my ideal" (70), here "ideal" meaning a marriage based on love. As she explains: "my heart does not love Dauda Dieng. My mind appreciates the man. But heart and mind often disagree" (66).

Ramatolaye refuses to become a token woman, who according to Mary Daly, is the kind of woman that has been allowed into "pieces of patriarchal territory as a show of female presence" (334). Just as she had refused to marry Tamsir Fall who sought her hand so she could compliment him, in the same breath, Ramatolaye refuses Dauda Dieng because she doesn't want to fall in the same trap – become the ornamental second wife. She refuses to become "the other woman, Daddy's girl, the artifact" (Daly 335) and by so doing, she becomes the discovered self who washes her "hands/mind of anti-septic anti-self; the internalized possessor" (339) and ultimately resists falling prey to Dieng's endearments.

Instead, Ramatolaye strides across the domestic threshold into a hybrid space, the radio and cinema, which constitute a comforting space. With the radio, she shuns the distorting voices of society that prescribe her a passive role and instead, listens to the uplifting messages of the songs that awaken her sense of hope. The cinema becomes a

great distraction for her, from which she learns “lessons of greatness, courage and perseverance” (52). The films she watches here broaden her horizon and through the visions of possibility they provide, she survives. The cinema as a temporal space then allows Ramatolaye to experience a sense of freedom, and passion. Despite the sustained disapproval from society - “people stared at the middle-aged lady without a partner” (51) - Ramatolaye undertakes this entertainment in earnest, faces her alienation bravely and only seeks the sympathetic appreciation of her close friend Aissatou.

After witnessing Ramatolaye come to voice, most critics have a hard time understanding her decision to stay in her marital homestead. Ramatolaye herself designates the decision as a kind of fatalism, a pre-determined fate that encompasses all African women. To her, all women “have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed” (88). In fact, by letting Ramatolaye stay in her husband’s home despite being abandoned, Ba casts a question mark on the very idea of resistance. For instance, what does it mean to be an agent of change when Ramatolaye’s resistance only re-inscribes her back within the fixed grounds of her society’s patriarchal order? Why does Ramatolaye stay on as Madou Fall’s wife when he takes on a second wife and consequently abandons her? Critics<sup>4</sup> like Florence Stratton believe that the novel is

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Grimes disagrees with Stratton, saying that Ramatolaye’s decision to stay in her husband’s home is a sign of taking control, but she too is at pains to explain in concrete terms how staying in an abandoned marriage is a sign of taking control. She cites Ramatolaye’s decision to learn to drive a car that Aissatou buys as the ultimate benchmark for Ramatolaye’s agency. Shirin Edwin in “Expressing Islamic Feminism in Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter*” locates Ramatolaye’s decision to stay within the parameters of Islam, noting that she accepts the polygamous arrangement because she loves her husband, a condition in Islam that can only be “conceived within a marital framework” (134). Edwin draws this conclusion from Ramatolaye’s declaration that she had never “conceived of happiness outside of marriage” (56).

simply a “psychological case study of a contemporary middle-aged and middle-class Senegalese woman,” who “is unable to face the ...dreadful prospect of being a single woman” (160).

Despite the critics’ misgivings, however, Ramatolaye’s decision to stay in her home after her husband abandons her for a younger woman is based on the rational thought that leaving a marriage in which she had spent twenty-five years and starting afresh would drain her of energy, not to mention the huge responsibility she would bear caring for her twelve children. She contemplates the price women who overtly defy their traditions pay and concludes that it is too steep. There are those who run mad like Jacqueline whose husband, Samba Diack, runs after “slender Senegalese women ... respecting neither wife nor his children” (42). Jacqueline is from Ivory Coast but she married Samba Diack, a medical doctor from Senegal. As is the lot of all the women in Ba’s novel, Samba Diack abandons Jacqueline, sending her into a nervous breakdown before she is admitted in a psychiatric ward. All the while, as Jacqueline cried, “Samba Diack ‘lived it up’” (42).

I counted the abandoned or divorced women of my generation whom I knew. I knew few whose remaining beauty had been able to capture a worthy man, a man who added fine bearing to a good situation and who was considered ‘better, a hundred times better than his predecessor.’ The misery that was the lot of these women was rolled back with the invasion

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of the new happiness that changed their lives, filled out their cheeks, brightened their eyes. I knew others who had lost all hope of renewal and whom loneliness had quickly laid underground. (40)

While Ramatolaye's criticism of Jacqueline and all those betrayed women demonstrates that she does not identify with either their passive resignation or entrepreneurial ethos as exhibited by Aissatou, she strategically deploys the one or the other depending on her particular circumstances. On the one hand, she seeks the independence that will free her from the anguish of a second marriage, while at other times, when threatened by the prospect of social isolation, she pursues an alternative path. As Charles Sarvan says "Ramatolaye is a paradox, a conservative in revolt. She may endorse the European headmistress's exhortation to leave the bog of supervision, custom, and tradition, ... but a part of her remains cautious, conservative, and 'patriotic'" (Sarvan).

Following her inner voice, Ramatolaye, to her family's great surprise, remains in her marital home. To understand this decision, we have to look at what postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft and Gareth Griffiths term "abrogation" and "appropriation," - two strategies that the postcolonial subject embraces in order to resist authority. In *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors explain that with "abrogation," a subject refuses "the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct usage,' and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words" (37). "Appropriation" on the other hand, is the "process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (38). Ramatolaye's decision can thus be designated as an act of appropriation in which she

embraces her marginality with the aim of uncovering the social codes of polygamy for all to see. We get to hear how her society treats an abandoned woman because through Ramatolaye's actions, these social codes are laid out for examination and critique.

Ramatolaye rejects the decision Aissatou takes, "the abrogation" of culture, because she prefers to appropriate and modify the system according to her terms. For instance during Modou's wake, his sisters accord both Ramatolaye and her co-wife, Binetou, the same respect, celebrating, with "the same ease and same words" (4) Ramatolaye's thirty years of marriage against Binetou's three. As expected, Ramatolaye is outraged at this apparent desire by her in-laws "to level out" (4). This brush with avenging in-laws and opportunistic neighbors whose only intentions for attending the funeral are to enrich themselves, she claims, strengthen her resolve against the institution of polygamy. With her tongue somewhat in cheek, Ramatolaye details how her late husband in a perverted sense of self aggrandizement "wickedly determined to remove [Binetou] from the critical and unsparing world of the young" (10). As the letter progresses, it becomes apparent that while Ramatolaye considers polygamy the underlying cause of most African women's source of grief, she is willing to work within it and expose its ills.

By rejecting the notion that any single recourse to desertion should define a person's life or marriage options, Ramatolaye plays into what bell hooks refers to as the "oppositional gaze" - that defiant attitude that marginalized people engage in as a site of resistance. hooks writes: "Subordinates in relations of power learn experientially that there is a critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, one that is oppositional" (116).

hooks implies that black women have the capacity to create spaces of agency from which they can look back and name what they see. For Ramatolaye, the oppositional gaze is to respond to the negation of what the African woman has been reduced to in the Senegalese household, where after a quarter of a century of marriage complete with 12 children, all she hears is that God intended for her husband to have a second wife, and that there is “nothing he could do about it” (*So Long* 37).

At the end of the novel, Ramatolaye proclaims that hope still lives within her despite every disappointment and humiliation (81). But does Ramatolaye’s attempt to formulate a viable voice succeed? She seeks a voice that disrupts her society’s patriarchal mores – she successfully fends off Tamsir’s overtures and Dieng’s offer of a polygamous marriage. But because her life is still defined within the patriarchal realm, her subversions cannot be easily maintained. On the eve of Aissatou’s planned visit, Ramatolaye tempers the excitement of seeing her friend with a sense of despair: “I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are ever present, and male egoism resists” (88).

Ramatolaye knows that resisting society and the pressure to conform and obey is also circumscribed by the knowledge that the community will try to destroy her. As Dale Bauer tells us,

society responds with a counterstroke to overturn, negate, or appropriate the resistance. In this way, resistance is homogenized and made part of the community, made tame and domesticated ... The individual’s struggle

against the social conventions which define and inscribe subjectivity into sociality reveal the structure by which the body is controlled, seduced and manipulated. (167)

Despite knowing that she has found a feminine identity and voice, Ramatolaye also is aware that in a culture ruled by patriarchy, her subversive voice is only temporary. Butler says in *Gender Trouble* that if subversion is to be achieved, “it will be a subversion from within the terms of the law ... the culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its ‘natural’ past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities” (93).

Applying this idea to Ramatolaye’s search for self, we could say that Ramatolaye’s dream for a successful sense of self will first have to be subverted within the laws of patriarchal discourse itself. Ramatolaye’s realization that “all women have almost the same fate, which religions or unjust legislation have sealed” (88) underscores the antagonism between the feminine subject and the objectifying world of discourse she inhabits. Ramatolaye, then, must insistently remake the conventions of this patriarchal tradition, using them in order to transform them; appropriating them in order to make them her own. In order to understand this appropriation, de Certeau offers an analysis of the creative forms of empowerment, the “subtle, stubborn, resistant activity of groups, which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and relationships” (18). Ramatolaye is thus shown working within the “already established forces and relationships” that de Certeau talks about; when she decides to appropriate the cultural tradition of the Islamic culture where she is secluded

for four months and ten days as she mourns the death of a husband who had abandoned her. Her success at working within this dominant cultural economy is seen in her ability to appropriate the Islamic religious practice by reclaiming it and not rejecting it. Uzo Esonwanne aptly notes that “Ramatolaye circumvents the constraint of confinement imposed by Islamic custom with an Islamic ritual. Never an apostate, she works within Islam, finding novel uses for its rules, rituals, and regulations, cross-breeding them with alien generic formats” (85).

Ramatolaye utilizes her seclusion, to carve a space from which she extracts a public presence. The prayers and chants she offers become public expressions of her religious feelings, thus allowing her to surmount the marginal religious space to which Islam relegates women in Senegal. As Christian Coulon says, “women are present and sometimes, as in Senegal, powerful within Islam, though occasionally they may be using religion as a pretext for a general expression of female sociability” (125). Ramatolaye writes:

Comforting words from the Koran fill the air; divine words, divine virtue, warnings against evil, exaltations of humility, and faith ... I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with demands of religions. Reared since childhood on their precepts, I expect not to fail. (5,8)

While Ramatolaye is portrayed here as promising to adhere principally to a set of religious attitudes, her subjectivity is also correlated with an awareness of her situation and one is tempted to read in her confessed sense of piety a duty which she is simply

obliged to perform. Shirin Edwin tells us that Ramatolaye's keen awareness of the Qur'anic message allows her to critique her husband's transgressions within the Islamic teachings. He writes: "She [Ramatolaye] refuses to violate the prohibition in Islam on the use of magic, thereby setting her strict practice of the religion as a perfect foil to Modou's infringement of the Qur'anic mandate of equity in a polygamous marriage" (730). When she learns of Modou's second wedding to Binetou, she "force [s herself] to check [her] inner agitation" (38) and to overcome her bitterness, she thinks of human destiny, where each life "has its share of heroism, an obscure heroism, born of abdication, or renunciation and acceptance under the merciless whip of fate" (11). This sense of humanity's fatalism, which fits squarely in her religious teachings, allows Ramatolaye a sense of legitimacy in critiquing society's ills based on the Islamic standard.

Indeed as Esonwanne notes, "if the world as perceived by Arab Islamic orthodoxy was, indeed a "plenum," for Ramatolaye, Aissatou, and other women in Afro-Islamic cultures, it is less so. Neo-colonial Senegal is a world of incompleteness, a world of potentialities which narratives may amplify or diminish" (87). Esonwanne's observation shows that the objective is to amplify Ramatolaye's life which is private and yet public, individualistic and circumscribed by the social at the same time. Ba knows that in order for an African woman to survive in a country like Senegal, she has to obey the rules of her religion. She is well aware of the all-embracing hold that Islam has on women as individuals and her interest lies not in challenging this religious hold, but in re-affirming the women's individuality, despite religion's dictates.

Such expectations of the patriarchal logos are inescapable, but as de Certeau suggests, they may be utilized as a basis for production. Ba adapts these “innumerable and infinite small transformations of and within the dominant cultural economy (de Certeau xii-xiii), to her characters’ interests, making them the springboard from which they remember and analyze their lives as they construct narratives that promise both to capture the specifications of personal experience and thrust themselves in a negotiating position for women in Africa. While the novel falls short of being radical, the narrative is fully aligned with a feminist mould. Ba’s strategic deployments of gendered, classed and other identities create spaces for multiple potentials through which women can confront their historical and cultural situations.

## Chapter Three

### Transgressing Motherhood: Yvonne Vera's

#### *Without A Name* (1994) and *Butterfly Burning* (1998)

In an article on motherhood among the Malagasy people, of central Madagascar, Mireille Rabenoro tells the story of the mythical Vazimba society that traces the origins of the world to women. In this society, women were regarded as princesses because they came from water and were the source of life. The women thus attained a venerated position, since they could perpetuate the continuation of family and society (Rabenoro). Elsewhere, Muigai Wa-Gachanji, researching images of women in Kenyan oral narratives, concludes that in most African folktales, women emerge as the “custodians of wisdom, wit and intelligence” (77). She cites an example of a well known Kenyan folktale in which a monster destroys a whole village, devours the children, women and men, but spares an expectant mother. The mother later gives birth to a son, who grows up to fight and kill the monster (Wa-Gachanja 77). While this tale emphasizes the bravery and heroism of the son, it at the same time reinforces the women's centrality in ensuring the continued existence of families, clans and society at large through their roles as mothers. These folktales are not representative of the entire African continent, but they illustrate the idea that in most African myth tales, the archetypal portrayal of the woman

is immortalized through her selfless protection and self-sacrificing devotion as she strives to keep the family and society together.

However, this mythologized presentation of the women as a source of life does not necessarily reveal any genuine articulation of their social power; rather, it reveals a maternal body that is valorized for its role and expected function as the perpetuator of society. In contemporary society, this ideological role of the mother, has led to the observance of the 'myth' of the African mother that Filomena Steady describes:

The most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole ... the importance of motherhood and the evaluation of the childbearing capacity by African women is probably the most fundamental difference between the African woman and her western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women. (243)

This idealization of the Mother Africa trope then produces and constructs woman "as ideal virgin-mother figure, prostitute, madam, Madonna and/or a barmaid farmer "(Stratton 122). Because woman is treated as a fetish, she becomes the object of the male gaze, one that is to be owned and idealized; a symbol of man's honor and glory. And as bell hooks says, the culture of mother worship, though positively motivated, "extols the virtues of self-sacrifice while simultaneously implying that such a gesture is not reflective of choice and will, rather the perfect embodiment of a woman's 'natural' role" (451). As a result, women are assigned a dual responsibility by the society: to build the nation as productive workers, and provide the domestic hearth for bringing up the future generation. Men, on the other hand, realize themselves solely in their work, with no

comparable responsibilities. African society in effect then becomes a patriarchal order, in which women are the backbone of both family and society.

But as Mariamma Ba points out, African women writers no longer accept the “nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa” (qtd in Schipper 46). Ba here is responding to writers like Leopold Sedar Senghor, a Negritude poet and Senegal’s first president who equates a woman’s role to that of nurturer and protector of the Nation. In a poem “Femme Noir” the narrator recalls with nostalgia, his mother’s endearing love. “I grew up in your shadow, the sweetness of your hands shielded my eyes” (qtd in Larrier 193). Like other earlier male writers, Senghor idealizes the trope of Mother Africa, a trope that Ba wants de-mystified since it idealizes the woman, re-inscribing her subordinated position further.

In this chapter, I consider how women experience and resist the hegemonic definitions of motherhood in their everyday interaction. As we saw in chapters One and Two, Flora Nwapa invokes a mythical concept, the goddess archetype, to capture the values of the African woman’s subjectivity, and Mariama Ba negotiates a Senegalese culture of codes and mores through the action of writing to re-inscribe the African woman into the public arena; Yvonne Vera’s world demands radical strategies because unlike her counterparts, hers is a contemporary society mired in violence and war. The two novels *Without A Name* (1994) and *Butterfly Burning* (1998) are concerned with locating strategies that can legitimately be theorized as resistance, in the absence of a societal sanctioned movement that challenges oppression based on the expectations of a woman fulfilling her obligatory role amidst traumatizing circumstances. While in *Without*

*A Name* the heroine Mazvita kills her baby and in *Butterfly Burning*, Phephelaphi performs an abortion on her self, the two novels are anchored in Zimbabwe's civil war of the 1970s and examine the wounds of the war from the women's point of view. Infanticide and abortion are not the common options through which women attempt to construct a sense of subjectivity. By centering the question on why the women perform these actions, I'm suggesting that the novels are simply exploring the roots of African women's selfhood in a revised understanding that motherhood can be a forced and psychological experience of nothing less than trauma. Thus, in constructing the narratives of *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning* around individual women's subversive actions, Vera experiments with the possibilities of the different layers of individual stories that specifically speak to a woman-centered consciousness.

Because Vera grounds her novels in an ethos of women that society considers "monstrous," she represents a maternal concept that critically reworks the deeply patriarchal and male dominated model in the Zimbabwean society. Aware of the rhetorical and political power of motherhood, Vera reconfigures the experience of womanhood such that the virtues of a good and self-sacrificing mother are presented as socially constructed roles that can be subverted. She deviates from the desire to celebrate the often forgotten African mother by problematizing the maternal body into what Hortense Spillers calls the "mother and mother dispossessed" binary (80). In the article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" Spillers contests the matriarchalist values the white dominant culture assigns the enslaved communities in American society and emphasizes the reclamation of the "monstrosity" and the problematization of gender expectations to create spaces that allow women to engage in

extreme measures to counter the masculinist narrative that their cultures impose upon them. In Zimbabwe, the matriarchalist values are imbued in the valorized concept of motherhood and to overcome them, Vera engages a subversive maternal poetics at the center of her cultural critique to depict motherhood as a complex state that is influenced by powerful psychological and cultural forces. Her works fall into the category of literature written in the 1990s, a decade following the independence struggle or the Second Chimurenga as it is known Zimbabwe. Shortly after the war that started in 1965 and ended in 1980, Kizito Muchemwa notes that most of the literature in Zimbabwe was celebratory in style, praising the new nation and failed to offer a critical outlook on the atrocities that were meted upon women in both rural and urban Zimbabwe (200). Seeking to retrieve the silenced subjectivities of the women, Vera rejects the patriarchy embodied in the public discourse of the Zimbabwean nation and instead addresses the “violence of history and memory” (Muchemwa 200) in colonial and post-colonial Zimbabwe.

With skill and insight, Vera casts motherhood or the lack thereof against a background of cultural change and violence, showing how the changes in the country’s landscape affects not only the body and choices of the would-be mother, but also women’s expectations in all their dimensions. She suggests that in the light of a changing power structure, where the rural landscape to which a generation of women were accustomed is changing, their lives have not been entirely gratifying experiences. The women seem to be plagued by a restlessness occasioned by stultifying cultural expectations. They are subjected to the trauma that accrues from war such as rape and they are denied opportunities to realize their dreams. All Mazvita wants in *Without A*

*Name* is “a new angle to her reality, an untried advantage” (8). Instead, she is confronted with rape and an unwanted pregnancy. Phephelaphi in *Butterfly Burning* searches for a self with an “outline” (99). Instead, she too ends up pregnant and risks missing a chance to attend nursing school. Vera shows that these women live difficult lives, and must reconcile the tensions between their aspirations and cultural expectations. As Stephen Chan observes, Vera’s novels “point out a private pain – and that only reconciliation between what is private and public can take the nation forward, can allow the state sound citizens, and can allow citizens to be sound individuals” (380). What the novels achieve, then, is the depiction of what Chan calls a “cogito” (380), a concept that involves the “knowing that knows, because what it knows is too terrible for knowledge to bear” (380).

In particular, *Without A Name*, set in war-torn Zimbabwe in 1977, offers a vivid dramatization of Chan’s “cogito” concept. The novel, controlled by the omniscient narrator, is about a mother who, traumatized by the effects of war, refuses to accept motherhood and separates her maternal “instincts” from her sense of female subjectivity. The plot in *Without A Name* has very little action. Mazvita, the mother who commits infanticide, was raped and impregnated during the war and her current lover, Nyenyedzi, wants her to stay with him in the village as they wait for the war to end. Mazvita believes there’s more to life than staying in the village and heads into the city where she finds a new lover, Joel, on the streets of Harare. When Joel finds out about her pregnancy, he throws her out of his one-roomed hovel. Desperate and with no assistance, Mazvita kills her infant child and retraces her steps back to the village to atone for her sins. Apart from this story-line, the rest of the novel is rendered in evocative, stream of consciousness prose that trace Mazvita’s journey from the village, to the city and then back.

The novel starts with Mazvita on a bus retracing her steps back to the village. Despite being surrounded by a multitude of passengers chatting incessantly on the bus, Mazvita feels alone, since she cannot unburden the secret she's carrying – that she killed her only baby and “had lost her center, the center in which her thoughts had found anchor” (8). Without explaining how Mazvita lost “her center,” Vera then takes the reader back to when Mazvita, presumably still in possession of her “center,” sought to disentangle herself from the rural areas that for the most part bore the brunt of the liberation forces that often committed atrocities against their own people. Mazvita's lover Nyenyedzi wants her to stay rooted to the land because he believes that it's only their presence that will cleanse the land of the war's ramifications. “It is like that with a war,” he says. “We must remain here or else join the fight to cleanse the land, not find new dreams to replace our ancient claim” (39).

But Mazvita doesn't agree with Nyenyedzi's vision of the land and she doesn't want the land to “hold” her. Instead, Mazvita looks beyond the horizons of the land to the city, seeing in it an arena in which she would seek individual freedom. To Mazvita the city speaks of an escape from a tangled web of community assumptions and beliefs harbored by men like Nyenyedzi who cling to the valorized images of the land as a mother figure, because as he says, the land “is inescapable ... it is everything and without it there's no day or night ... the land defines our destinies” (39).

Mazvita knows that the land is deceptive and it shelters cruel elements like the soldier who raped her and claimed possession of her as if she were land itself; the land here representing a mythological entity in the national consciousness of the populace as something to be claimed. The narrator tells us that when the unnamed soldier rapes

Mazvita, he tells her not to “hide the things of her body ... [and that] he whispered as though he had offered her life” (28). But Mazvita knows better. She reads in the act of rape the subjugation of rural women during the war. She knows that the land has “forgotten us ... [and] dreams new dreams for itself” (39). She therefore sets her sights on a place she can start all over again, “a new location where she expects to find new possibilities and can take new chances” (56). Mazvita rejects the community’s vision of the land because she wants to seek a new version of truth in which the land is simply a representation rather than a reality. In this text, Vera goes past the mythological representations of land as a communal representative of truth in which it is nurturing, and instead envisions it as an ambivalent entity, capable of alienating its people. While the land for Nyenyedzi is “our truth” (40), and he wouldn’t leave it because it represents the histories of his people, Mazvita wanted something different for her truth:

She wanted to conquer her reality then, and not endure the suspension of time. She felt a strong sense of her own power and authority, of her ability to influence and change definitions of her own reality, adjust boundaries to her vision, banish limits to her progress. (40)

In order for Mazvita to “conquer her reality,” she looks to the city, where she envisions a mirror of a self she didn’t know she possessed. She imagines that Harare’s complexity and alluring nature would be an ideal site to realize her dreams and desires because while there, “a new life began, grew around you, embraced you like a hurricane... [although] sometimes, it killed you” (53). Nana Wilson-Tagoe characterizes Mazvita’s desires as “dreams of personal initiative and power that the narrative connects to larger issues on how the ancient ‘truths’ and ‘unities’ of the land maybe re-interpreted in a changed

context” (170). Vera depicts Harare standing at the center of momentous processes that recast Zimbabwean society in the 1970s.

Once an enclave of the colonial powers, the rapid development of Harare lured the masses from the countryside who recognized in it a revolution in social mores. By 1977, the year in which *Without A Name* is set, Harare was the nation’s premier spot for freedom. Here, “freedom came in circles. Endless and dizzying ... people walked into shops and bought revolutions” (55). Inevitably, both men and women felt freed from the strict social mores, but more than the men, the women took their freedom to the extreme. As Vera notes, they “walked into glittering Ambi shops and bought their Afro wigs. Thus clad, they asserted an inchoate independence” (55). It is to this city that Mazita arrives hoping for a “future in which she would look backward and feel fulfilled” (66). She hoped that the city would deliver her from the feminine, domestic, private spaces she had shared with Nyenyedzi in Mubaira. She constructs the city as her space because “she had faith in untried realities” (64). But Mazvita soon finds out that in order to succeed, one ought to be anchored firmly on the ground, and when Joel, a stranger she meets on the streets asks if she needed a place to stay, she agrees, since he offers “another version of the city, an aspect of her potential freedom” (66).

Mazvita, like the multitudes of other women who trek to the city, takes on a dual role in order to survive. The women respond to the distinct pressures of city life by offering “their bodies as a ransom for their land, their departed men, their corrupted rituals of birth” (72). For Mazvita, these changes are experienced as living a double life – attempting to fulfill her responsibilities for maintaining a community while at the same time performing a private mode of survival. She builds private altars to her “wounded

dreams,” yet publically she expresses a masked expression and conjures “freedom from chaos” (71). The city allows her the space to reunite with her authentic self that she had buried while in the rural areas. Together with Joel, she builds a life that is devoid of intimacy, yet one that advances her desired other/self. “The main point of freedom was maintaining boundaries ... Mazvita and Joel simply lived together, kept their pasts from each other” (59). Yet, despite the intention to adapt to the city and translate the experience of urban space into her determined self, Mazvita drops the quest once she fails to attain a job and returns to the domestic space where she irons Joel’s white shirts till they shine (59). And just when she learns to place a mask on her secret desires like the other city women who “picked their colors from a burning sun” (72), Mazvita learns that she’s pregnant. However, the pregnancy, like the land, threatens to “pull her back from her design to be free... she didn’t imagine where she would give birth in this chaos of voices” (74) and she makes the conscious decision to kill her child.

In her seminal work on motherhood as an institution, Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution*, distinguishes between infanticide as “a deliberate social policy” and mothers who murder their infants and children. In the chapter titled “the heart of maternal darkness,” Rich writes of the power a mother has over the life of a child, one of women’s few sources of power. She then asks readers to consider the acts of “numberless women [who] have killed children they knew they could not rear, whether economically or emotionally, children forced upon them by rape, ignorance, poverty, marriage, or, by the absence of, sanctions against, birth control and abortion” (258). For Rich, infanticide is one of the consequences of a motherhood without choice, a result of a desire to repossess women’s bodies. Likewise, maternal love,

or the lack of it, is distorted by the complex social conditions in which the woman finds herself. Rich looks back at the heroic figure of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the first feminist to defend women charged with infanticide, and concludes that culture and society forced such women to betray their best selves, binding them with "the triple cord of a political, religious, and social serfdom-that have made [woman] a pliant, pitiable victim to the utter perversion of the highest and holiest sentiments of her nature" (262).

Although African scholarly critics like Obioma Nnaemeka take exception to Rich's argument about motherhood, arguing that motherhood in the African context is not based on motherhood as a "patriarchal institution" but rather as "an experience ... with its pains and rewards" (5), Rich's observations on infanticide have a social relevancy to Vera's text. In general, as Nnaemeka says, African texts seek a balance in the critique of the institution of motherhood, always careful to give it a "human face" (5). However, Vera's texts distance themselves from these perceived notions of maternity and locate their thematics firmly within a social struggle in the changing world of Zimbabwe, which includes a thorough critique of how women experience motherhood. Thus, with the help of Rich's classic, we witness Mazvita's infanticide as a social consequence that exposes as inadequate the very idea of a definitive truth about motherhood even in an African context. The language Mazvita uses to describe her feelings when she must kill her child because Joel will not allow her to stay with him is typical of a feminine consciousness that will not allow both sexual and psychological violence.

This hole is so deep and so old and heavy on my back. Joel, this body is  
not me sinking into this hole so deep and dark. Where can I go and remain  
whole? Who will help me carry this pain? Where will I speak this tale,

with which mouth, for I have no mouth left, no fingers left, no tears to drink. Let me thirst and die. (98).

It would be easier to deplore Mazvita's inclination to dispense with the baby whom she describes as hindering her, than to acknowledge that these are the words of a woman who feels "betrayed" (99), because the child has curtailed her desire to "move forward" (99). In addition, while her instincts had always been to "dream new dreams," these dreams are shattered because Joel and the presence of the baby suggest that she "move backward, into the past" (99). Mazvita cannot remain in the city because she has no means to support herself and the baby. Perhaps her most difficult maternal decision occurs when she is faced with the understanding that she has to smother the child if she is to claim "her dream and her freedom" (109).

Mazvita's ruminations at this crisis suggest the difficulty she has in reconciling her notions of maternal feeling with her own desires. Her deliberations expose the internal split women bear towards fulfilling the notions of maternal expectations with the ideal of seeking their dreams. Despite an unquestionable attachment to the child, Mazvita considers its existence an obstacle which hinders her from spreading "her arms and embrac[ing] the future. She wanted her arms but they were heavy with child" (99). At this point, respect for maternity is not her primary concern; her very survival is at stake and when she makes the decision to kill the baby, "her rejection [of motherhood] was sudden and fierce and total" (109).

In an interview with Jane Bryce, Vera speaks of how she conceives her novels from visual moments that she seeks to expound and contextualize. In *Without A Name*, this moment is when Mazvita strangles her child. For Vera, such a moment, frozen so to speak, is "so powerful"

(219) that she can't lose sight of it. The incident is narrated in slow motion, with Mazvita deliberating each movement – because as Vera explains, she wanted the reader to feel how Mazvita had felt as she did it because the goal was “to bring the a reader as close as possible to an experience” (222).

She took a black tie from a rack in a corner of the room and dropped it over the child's neck. It rested over the child in a huge loop, which, on another occasion, would have made her laugh. She did not pause. She claimed her dream and her freedom ... she felt the bone at the bottom of that neck tell her that the child had died. The bone broke softly ... she had broken the neck of her child. (109)

Surprisingly, the only aspect of the entire experience that Mazvita is able to claim for herself is the knowledge that she successfully breaks the child's neck. Nonetheless, she experiences the moment her child dies fully, for this is the point at which she claims “her dream and her freedom.” Thus, the ultimate concern the infanticide exposed, though never fully articulated, is not that Mazvita kills her child; far worse are the norms that expect women to be mothers, without considering the social consequences of those for whom maternity is at best an accident and at worst, an unwelcome blight that results from rape and other social upheavals.

That Mazvita's desire for freedom – with all that it represents in terms of self identity – is contingent upon killing the child points to the impossibility of the maternal situation she finds herself in, and the unflinching desire to seek her own truth. The

economic and sexual standards that define the relation between Joel and Mazvita make the maternal “choice” that Mazvita takes inevitable. In his castigation of Mazvita for bearing another man’s child, Joel highlights a sexual politics that polices and punishes the female body and invalidates the experiences of raped women and unmarried mothers. Joel only sees Mazvita as an object to fulfill his sexual desires and once he discovers that she’s pregnant, he disavows her, denying her “an opportunity she had sought, to grow” (90).

In this context, Vera examines infanticide as a manifestation both of power and powerlessness. But she goes further than simply showing the binary opposition of these two concepts. She is not simply interested in showing that Mazvita is a victim of patriarchal and colonial laws of her society; rather, she locates in her maternal ambivalence a fluid and complex understanding. She renegotiates the concept of motherhood, separating it from the outlines instituted by patriarchy and in so doing, widens the possibilities for women. She opens up a space for a sense of maternal subjectivity thus echoing what Irigaray has said of women and enforced motherhood:

[W]e are always mothers once we are women. We bring something other than children into the world, we engage something other than children: love, desire, language, art, the social, the political, the religious, for example. But this creation has been forbidden for us for centuries and we must re-appropriate this maternal dimension that belongs to us as women. (Whitford 43)

After killing her baby, Mazvita retraces her steps to the rural areas she had earlier abandoned in a bid to re-appropriate a “maternal dimension” that Irigaray talks about on her own terms. She undertakes the journey as a symbolic act to come to terms with her sense of self, and to seek redemption so that at the end, we as readers acknowledge her consciousness. Vera explains Mazvita’s journey as a “way of showing her self-inflicted pain, that she carries her burden and shows her courage. She doesn’t flinch from what she’s done ... it’s hers” (Hunter 83). Instead of contracting into fear, Mazvita indeed survives with what she loses: she courageously carries the dead child on her back to Mubaira, where she “could begin [afresh]” (115). She becomes a woman who values and embodies a sense of a defined self, and motherhood, even if short-lived, has reinforced her determination to be dominated by no one. She conceives of a vision to reinvent herself, “without a name” (115).

The return to Mubaira will enable Mazvita to preserve the detachment necessary to forget the past and pursue her solitary pilgrimage. The night before she finally arrives in Mubaira, where everyone has ceased to exist thanks to the ravages of the war, Mazvita reflects on this decision: “It’s cumbersome to have a name. It is an anchor. It brings figures to her memory. It recalls this place to her, which, earlier, she has chosen to forget ... she would have liked to begin without a name, soundlessly and without pain” (115). Back in the village, content that no one would remember her, because “she had no fears” (115), Mazvita strives for a new start, when she would have no link to the past, “wish[ing] to forget the names that call her own name” (115). She “gathers the burning grass” (116) which will constitute the memory of her departed relatives, but mainly because new grass will always grow “over the burnt grass” (115). Along with the

realization of an irredeemable sense of loss, which would recall for Mazvita her possessed self when a soldier raped her, this gesture – of gathering the burning grass – can be read as a declaration of a determined avowal to start life anew. Henceforth, Mazvita’s actions are narrated with a sense of purpose. She moves with “gentle footsteps” (116) and we are told that she finally releases the dead baby from her back and into her arms. As she settles down, she is engulfed by a silence that is so “deep, hollow, and lonely” (116), although over the horizon, “the mist is blue like the sky” and she will find a path again (115).

Vera’s next novel, *Buterfly Burning* continues with the horrors involved with a blighted motherhood, this time occasioned by abortion. Vera’s centering of the action around abortion stands in contrast to the insistence on phallic power and domination over the passive bodies one finds in the earlier male novelists<sup>5</sup> who sought to recreate the identity around the nation as the mother figure. She presents the idea of motherhood as a concept that is circumscribed, giving the impression that for her characters, motherhood is an activity that is foisted upon them because they occupy women’s bodies. For a long time, feminists have resisted the idea of essential motherhood, contesting the rosy picture persistently presented of motherhood as a fulfilling venture that every woman enjoys. As Patrice Diquinzio argues, “this resistance to essential motherhood enables feminism’s arguments for women’s equal subjectivity, agency, and entitlement, including the argument that women’s (potential or actual) mothering is irrelevant to women’s

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<sup>5</sup> For instance in Ngugi W’Thiongo’s *Petals of Blood*, the main character’s name, Wanja, is an adaptation of the Gikuyu word “mother earth,” a connotation Wanja lives up to as she is configured to nurture and mother the entire society.

subjectivity, agency, and entitlement” (20). DiQuinzio traces her arguments to *The Second Sex*, where Simone de Beauvoir argues for the delineation of motherhood from the sole determination of biology, designating it as an “object of choice and control and a site of struggle between men and women” (485). Aware that motherhood is never a choice in her society, Vera locates the maternal body as the site of oppression and crafts narratives that affirm a sense of female corporeality that counters the violence to which the body is subjected.

The protagonist of *Butterfly Burning*, Phephelaphi, lives her life subject to the social construction of a good and dutiful woman, the sole ideal that is permitted to women in colonial Zimbabwe. This role demands total and silent acquiescence to a set of maternal duties where a woman’s wishes and ambitions are secondary to her husband’s. And when a woman places her ambitions to the fore, as happens when Phephelaphi dreams of attending nursing school, the repercussions are dire. Not only does her lover, Fumbatha shun her, but her whole world crumbles. But then again, Vera’s heroine is strong enough to dismiss such limitations and believe that “she wanted a birth of her own” (80). The narrative commences with Phephelaphi’s arrival in her lover, Fumbatha’s life – when she “emerged breathless and gasping for air beneath his feet and rose out of the river like a spirit” (26). Again, like *Without A Name*, little happens in *Butterfly Burning*. Phephelaphi, an orphaned girl, meets Fumbatha, a middle aged man, and they start a relationship. Phephelaphi becomes pregnant, but aborts herself because the pregnancy would deny her a chance to attend a nursing school. When she falls pregnant again, and becomes estranged from Fumbatha, she commits suicide.

Set in colonial Zimbabwe in 1948, the novel addresses the tension established between the two lovers and their incompatible expectations. Young, beautiful and beguiling, Phephelaphi, despite being an orphan, is a woman who knows what she wants. When she first meets Fumbatha, she wonders what she “could give him without loss to herself” (31) and after staying with him for a while, she chooses to channel the bulk of her energy into applying for a vacancy at the United Nursing School because “Fumbatha could never be the beginning or end of all her yearning, her longing for which she could not find a suitable name” (75). But shortly before she attends school, Phephelaphi finds out that she’s pregnant, a pregnancy she terminates because by impregnating her Fumbatha had “intruded on her dream” (107). Stung by the betrayal that Phephelaphi could abort “his” child, Fumbatha instead chooses to have an affair with Deliwe, Phephelaphi’s friend. Feeling a deep sense of betrayal by both her lover and close friend, Phephelaphi must summon her strength to do her best and enter into nursing school for she believes that “an educated black woman could do more” (107). However, once she realizes that she’s pregnant for a second time, she sets her body aflame because with a baby, she wouldn’t be allowed into school and without a diploma, she’s nothing: “so I have to forget about training as a nurse altogether and what else am I to become but nothing” (145). Through the representation of Phephelaphi’s body as a site of maternal conflict in the novel, Vera interrogates society’s prescriptions of female subjecthood that is predicated on a woman fulfilling her maternal roles.

Fumbatha, 50, is a construction worker in the Makokoba Township of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe’s second largest city. The novel opens when he, together with other laborers,

is working in the searing mid-day sun in the fields, where “their bare soles grate against the stubble dotting the ground” (5). These workers, slaving for pittance for the colonial administrators, come across as battered souls whose only solace comes from the music they listen to as they “cut and level the grass till the sun is a crusty and golden distance away and throws cool rays over their worn arms” (5). This simple life reveals an important detail about Zimbabwe during the colonial times: the colonial machinery which plagued the country created a situation that cloaked the men in effeminacy and “otherness”. In response, the men learnt to survive by living “within the cracks” (6). The absence of meaningful jobs for grown up men like Fumbatha and the perpetual reality of brutality from the colonial masters obliged an entire generation of men to construct their own vision of masculinity based on a twisted sense of self. The bleakness of this reality leaves Fumbatha a broken man. He was born in 1896, the year his father, together with seventeen other insurgents, was hanged for resisting the white settlers. With his birth a “witness to dying” (14), Fumbatha grows up a shell of a man who is either always day dreaming or off building houses for the white settlers. For Fumbatha, then, any sense of real masculinity is accessible only in the paltry reminiscences of his father: his mother simply expects him “to know the link with the past” (14). The all-too-predictable effect of this trauma is that Fumbatha, who’s always dreaming of “the deaths of the seventeen men” (14), attains a twisted sense of masculinity that is hopelessly selfish and disconnected from reality. As a grown up man, he crafts his masculine identity via his interaction with and reaction against all that is feminine as is seen with his relationship with Phephelaphi.

Fumbatha meets Phephalaphi one bright morning as he is sitting along the banks of the Umguza River, day-dreaming about his father. She emerges from the river, “her eyes glittering like jewels before him, her arms the same color as the rock on which she rested” (26). At that moment, his own struggles against the daily grind of poverty and the colonial emasculation that have left him marked as one incapable of empathy suddenly dispense into something concrete that he can possess and genuinely call his own. Fumbatha figures Phephelaphi as “sunlight” whose “beauty was not expressed in her appearance alone but in the strength that shone beneath each word, each motion of her body” (26). After Fumbatha’s insistent questioning of her origins, he concludes that she is the possession he’s been waiting for. He believes that this young woman would give him a sense of belonging and a desire for life because “without her saying anything he felt she had offered him a promise” (29). In his eyes, she’s equivalent to the land he lost when the colonial powers appropriated it from his ancestors.

Fumbatha had never wanted to possess anything before, except the land.

He wanted her like the land beneath his feet from which birth had severed him. ... Here was a woman who made him notice that his feet were not on solid ground but on rapid and flowing water, and that this was a delight, that there was no harm. (28-29)

Twining Phephelaphi together with the land into a single entity<sup>6</sup>, Fumbatha casts her as a maternal figure, a site of female domesticity and the repository of his own desire for

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<sup>6</sup> While Vera’s novels are interlaced with Zimbabwe’s national consciousness, seen here when Fumbatha castigates Phephelaphi’s identity in terms of land, her main aim, as

recognition and belonging. In his isolated state (his father died the year he was born), Fumbatha becomes enthralled by the very idea of Phephelaphi as a desirable object whom he could possess and rule. He is grateful to the river which had “given him this woman, spitting her onto the rock like a dream” (27). In Phephelaphi, Fumbatha re-enacts his maternal connection to the land. Phephelaphi gives him faith and makes him forget “each of his footsteps on [the] ground which he longed for” (29).

Constructing Phephelaphi in such an image of life giving, Fumbatha figures her as a representative of the nurturing woman that is prefigured in the mythical representation of woman, underscoring Irigaray’s notion that in a woman’s “role [as] mother, woman represents a sense of place for man” and becomes the “envelop” by which man differentiates himself by making her his other (Whitford 169). Vera, like Irigaray, rejects the reconfiguration of the maternal body as a bedrock for man’s understanding of himself and works on the retrieval of this body from its condition as an object of male desire, grounding her characters’ identities in bodies that insist on their presence.

From the beginning, Vera subverts the patriarchally signified controlling mechanisms by symbolically dismantling the paternal corpus. Ordinarily, in most African patrilineal societies, the father’s last name establishes the human being in a patriarchal genealogy, effectively erasing the feminine subject. However, Vera resists this social identity by giving none of her characters a last name. In Phephelaphi’s case, her mother had initially named her Sakhile, but changed it to Phephelaphi because as a struggling mother in the Makokoba Township, she had to find an anchor both for herself and child.

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Hunter notes is to show “women’s despair and rage at the oppression due to their gender” (*Zimbabwean Nationalism* 239).

Lizzy Attree explains the origins of Phephelaphi's name in the Ndebele culture thus: "Pephelapha means to take refuge in, escape to [...] 'Phephata' blow, blow at, blow of wind; 'Phephezela': fly or flap in wind; 'is-phepha' : gale, storm" (qtd in Rooney 146). If Phephelaphi's name is traced to a sense of "escape," then she feels no need to be classified under a single unchanging identity. When she first meets with Fumbatha, she even allows him to rename her: "You could give me another name," she tells Fumbatha. "I do not mind being named by a stranger. I do not mind being renamed if it makes the present clearer" (30). If a name is presumed to denote individual identity, or in this case a connection to the patrilineal heritage, for Phephelaphi, there isn't space for individuality, meaning that she can slip into any role as long as it clears her quest for survival, fitting well into Irigaray's image of identity as a "birth never complete, body never created once and for all, face and form never definitely finished, always to be molded" ("Our Lips" 78).

As with Mazvita in *Without A Name*, Phephelaphi's search for a sense of self emerges best when her desires and dreams are given full consideration, which here includes traversing the traditional gender roles in Zimbabwe. According to Katrin Berndt, "the protagonist's distance to accepted role models emphasizes that the concept of the obedient wife waiting in the rural areas for the return of her husband is a myth" (172). For Phephelaphi articulating her desires is foremost on her agenda, and while the legitimacy of her speech is denied by the likes of Fumbatha, she still retains the tenacity and clarity with which to portray the ongoing politics of her self-representation. For instance when she passes her exams to the United School for Nursing, Fumbatha doesn't encourage her; instead, he reminds her of what they have: "We are happy together. I

work. I take care of you. It is not necessary for you to find something else” (70). Needless to say, Fumbatha’s restrictions cannot stem Phephelaphi’s determined vision. In her imagination, the idea of progress includes attending nursing school.

She wanted an opportunity to be a different woman and 1948 was a year when hope opened like a bright sky and an educated black woman could do more. She wanted to *be something with an outline*, and even though she was not sure what she meant, she wanted some respect, some dignity, some balance and power of her own. Finding herself. (106-107; emphasis added)

Between Fumbatha’s restrictions and her determined but frustrated search for a self with an outline, Phephelaphi finds yet another option. It comes to light in the person of Deliwe, her good friend with whom she develops a deep and close relationship. Deliwe, who owns a Shebeen (illegal bar), takes care of Phephelaphi and allows her a space to get out of Fumbatha’s containment. Theirs is not lesbian love – Deliwe has sexual relations with men. But it works as a substitute for the male-female gender dichotomy, representing a choice of a feminine world instead of the masculine one that dominates Phephelaphi’s world view. Discussing female friendship in “(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women,” Elizabeth Abel highlights the benefits for women when they establish intimacy with each other, noting that such relationships become vehicles for women’s self definition: “Identification, especially with a woman who is older or who is perceived as either older or wiser, is essential ... to the achievement of the central figure’s full identity” (418). The process of identification that Abel invokes underscores the reasons why Phephelaphi seeks Deliwe

whose every word charms the young woman. Discovering in Deliwe an aspect of her own desires and aspirations, Phephelaphi enters a relationship which differs from any that she has in the novel. Phephelaphi admires Deliwe's every word, and in striving to know her, Phephelaphi comes to know herself. "Finding herself, that was it. Phephelaphi wanted to be somebody. Not once but twice, thrice, she visited Deliwe at her house, and stood at her doorway and lingered again in the cigarette smoke" (75).

Deliwe, with unrestricted access to men and no children of her own, embodies for Phephelaphi an "other" who constitutes and reflects an essential aspect of a self with an "outline." To Phephelaphi, Deliwe "was some kind of sun, and herself some kind of horizon" (63). Without knowing it, Deliwe facilitates Phephelaphi's metamorphosis as she symbolically changes from a sensitive young woman who is guarded in Fumbatha's house, to a self-confident woman that emerges when she visits Deliwe. It is also in Deliwe's Shebeen that Phephelaphi is introduced to Kwela music, a traditional kind of music that leads her to a new realization of her self-worth, a self that no longer rests on Fumbatha's approval of her body. When one of Deliwe's customers makes the comment that "a woman is for loving" (80), Phephelaphi dismisses the comment as irrelevant, noting that what is important is not to be loved but to love oneself. As the narrator explains, Phephelaphi "wanted more than obligation" (75).

In addition to her sexual veracity, one of Deliwe's other crimes seems to be that she is not a good mother. Indeed, she is shown to put her own sexual satisfaction ahead of the community's interests (Fumbatha alleges that she teaches young boys to forget their troubles). This victory of the sexual instinct over the maternal one – "she liked to see a man fall on his knees" (64) – is cause for a great deal of anxiety as well as moral censure.

Here one agrees with Hope Jennings, who observes that when women deviate from their assigned maternal roles, in the symbolic order, they “transgress the paternal law, requiring punishment and repression of [their] desires” (66). Deliwe is therefore associated with a myriad of contradictions: she represents an independent ideal of womanhood that is specifically non-maternal. This is reinforced by her transgressive ways, one of which is to sleep naked, in direct defiance of the law enforcement officers who harass her for brewing illegal liquor for the men. She is not owned by any man, and while she sells alcohol, she is not addicted to it. She is as much in control of her own life and at 50, “nothing in her body told you she had such courage, except her eyes which held scorpions” (61). Since Phephelaphi sees a mirror image of herself in Deliwe, she resolves to find her social self in this social outcast whom she models as a mother substitute. Denied access to her biological mother for much of her life – Phephelaphi’s mother, Zandile, had given her up to her friend Gertrude and when the latter dies, Zandile has no obligation to mother her – Phephelaphi lacks a maternal figure. In Phephelaphi’s mind, befriending Deliwe, a figure outside of the maternal influence, ensures that she will be delivered from the vestiges of power – both within and outside of her – ideals she deems more important than any other.

As one who has learnt to value her freedom so entirely, Phephelaphi must find the allure of Deliwe irresistible precisely because Deliwe seems to embody freedom and does so within the confines of society. Much later in the novel, however, Phephelaphi uncovers the truth about Deliwe. What appears to be benevolence on Deliwe’s part turns out to be manipulation, as she spills all Phephelaphi’s secrets to Fumbatha. Deliwe had always desired to have Fumbatha and when he seeks her “doorway and blocks the

departing sun and remains there till she put her arms around him,” Deliwe cannot resist him (139). By preying on Phephelaphi’s innocence and trust, Deliwe had found a way to reinstate herself in the domestic sphere. Her character, which embodies the absence of traditional maternity along with the challenge to a woman’s position in a patriarchal society, demonstrates the lack of a definable function for women. Though her position as one who can transgress the law and takes men on her own terms offers women the potential for freedom and power, we see it operating in the novel without any positive effect. Deliwe’s need for affirmation and trust pushes her into covert and manipulative strategies. She lures Fumbatha into her house and secures his trust in a night. For instance, he tells her the history of his family – that his father was hanged together with sixteen other men in 1896, yet he had never divulged this “truest thing” (138) to Phephelaphi.

Deliwe’s betrayal notwithstanding, Phephelaphi emerges from her encounter with the Shebeen queen with a definite desire to become a nurse. While the men in Deliwe’s Shebeen see her as a “sunflower bending its head” (68), Phephelaphi resists the metaphorical images of submission and instead aspires to become a “flower blooming in her own green pod” (69). Unfortunately, while Vera is set on reexamining with greater determination the position of women’s needs, the year is still 1948 and women like Phephelaphi are still expected to move in ways that are fore-grounded in the colonial administration’s set-up. Although the offer to the nursing school was “there and it made her breathless just to imagine being anything else other than what she was” (107), the school would not admit her when she is pregnant. In response, Phephelaphi decides to terminate the pregnancy because without a nursing diploma, her professional plans would

be destroyed and she would be “nothing but a shallow substance” (110). Berndt reads in Phephelaphi’s abortion a claim to the right “to determine her time of motherhood, the right to control her own body. Therewith, she defies both patriarchal idealizations of motherhood and the symbolic appropriation of the objectified body” (192).

The abortion scene, spanning some twelve pages, emphasizes the high price women had to pay for progress or a self with an “outline” in pre-independent Zimbabwe. Although Phephelaphi loves Fumbatha, she knows she will lose her position in the nursing program if the white administrators discover the pregnancy because the “conditions of training were clear. She would not be accepted if she was pregnant” (99). In her desperation, Phephelaphi decides to crack open the “shell” of the defined social identity by facing the grim combat with her body.

The pain is more than she imagines. It is cutting. She holds it in her elbows which she pushes into the ground, behind her. She has to place the pain somewhere away from her own body. Somewhere else. But there is nowhere to hide anything. There is no shelter. Only her fingers merge with agon of her release. Her right hand closes. She has to accept her own pain in order to believe it, to live in it, to know its true and false nuances, for she desires desperately what is beyond the pain. (116)

The representation of Phephelaphi enduring this pain shows the rugged journey she must undertake in order to reach her self realization. The abortion signifies for Phephelaphi the start of the process of becoming, for much as she wants to enter nursing school without being pregnant, “it is not being a nurse that matters, but the movement forward – the entrance into something new and untried” (71). However, Vera presents the rhetoric of

this “something new and untried” in ambivalent terms, because Zimbabwe in 1948 was not yet ready to accept black women who transgress the paternal and colonial laws. After the abortion, Phephelaphi is left to embrace the isolation and loneliness that comes with it, noting that “to be born is a chance and good fortune, but to survive into tomorrow sheer motive and interest” (119).

And yet, the very experience of abortion is punctuated by memories of a better life, a longing for simple truths like “a morning with just the rising sun and its caress of the earth” (123). In this memory, Phephelaphi seeks solace in something mundane as sunrise “something she need not measure against her own body” (123). She conjures up these images in an effort to shield her from what is happening to her body, as she tries to repossess her womb, because as Irigaray observes in *Sexes and Genealogies*, “the womb is often fantasized as a devouring mouth because it is never thought of as the primal place in which we become body” (16). By reclaiming the womb, Phephelaphi counters her mother Zandile’s philosophy that there’s nothing she can do in Makokoba without being a man. Such sentiments, echoed by critics like Caroline Rooney who suggest that the act of Phephelaphi’s abortion is “not exactly a liberation” (149), because later she “folded into two halves, one part of her ... dead, the other living” (109), somehow miss Vera’s underlying point. In this extremely discomfoting act of abortion, Vera crafts a space in which Phephelaphi’s passion is expressed. In this single self-induced act, Phephelaphi negates the traditions of her people by interrupting the idea of life-giving that has for centuries immersed women in a passive dependence on men. At the same time, the act fulfills her notion of individuality and self-realization because she always longed to be a “different woman” (107). Investigating the moral dilemma that women face when they

consider whether to continue or abort a pregnancy, Carol Gilligan explains that often, they “see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend and by whose names they are know” (487).

Indeed Phephelaphi is aware of the impending moral censure not least from Fumbatha who feels deeply betrayed because she has “killed his child” (142) without telling him. “Now you have killed my child without telling me about it? Where did you bury my child?” (142). Killing “his” child is the ultimate betrayal and disloyalty Phephelaphi could have handed Fumbatha. But with her claim to the control of her body and her life, Berndt notes, Phephelaphi erases Fumbatha’s position as father who wants to assert his control over his family (165).

In creating a space for the expression of passion and identity through abortion, Vera’s novel marks a decisive shift from the earlier fiction that valorized woman as mother earth or mother Africa. She seeks to center previously marginalized categories of self and identity, particularly by celebrating the irrational forces that animate her characters. In her telling of Phephelaphi’s life, Vera presents passion as an instinctual and uncontrollable force that cannot be repressed. Indicating that this force, often leads to happy albeit conflicted self consciousness, Vera depicts Phephelaphi’s desire for freedom as an ambiguous and fluid expression. When, at the end of the novel Phephelaphi finds herself pregnant for the second time, she commits suicide by burning herself to death in the one-roomed house she shares with Fumbatha.

The idea of ending the novel in a suicide that operates as resistance against oppression risks undermining the feminist currents in the novel, particularly if Vera

wants us to see death itself as a new means of instinctual foundation for subjectivity. In fact critics like Eve Eisenberg take exception to Phephelaphi's suicide by self-immolation as an act of agency. Analyzing suicide as agency, Eisenberg asks: "If agency denotes self-willed action, then what do we make of the agency of an act that ends all future potential for action?" (1). To Eisenberg, the nihilistic language of nothingness in the final chapters suggest Phephelaphi's descent into a profound depression, the result of her failed participation in the economy of sacrificial exchanges demanded by Fumbatha (who wants her to give up her dream of "progress") and the nursing training program (which demands she give up Fumbatha and her children). Ultimately, Eisenberg concludes, Phephelaphi chooses to burn herself to death when she finds herself stranded between ideologies, no longer welcome in either of the two worlds she has so precariously straddled (7).

But self-immolation does not necessarily mean the end of the self and as Lizzy Attree writes, Vera's fiction has "a distinctive use of ellipsis and fluid narrative perspective which breaks with our accustomed dualistic habits of thought and thus defamiliarizing ideas and language with a greater ambiguity and fluidity of thought" (65). The ambiguity and fluidity of thought that Attree talks about is the process through which Phephelaphi dies. At one point, the narrator designates this process as an "opportunity" (149), yet at another level, it is simply a "spectrum of light finely crushed" (149). Kathy Charmaz examines the meanings that suicidal persons construct for their behavior succinctly in her sociological study *The Social Reality of Death: Death in Contemporary America*. She notes that some forms of suicide are meant to be self-affirming despite the

apparent irony that self-killing might appear to lead to the annihilation of the self. Suicide, Charmaz writes, can be a “means of taking control over one’s self” (258).

From Phephelaphi’s point of view, which changes literally in the second to last chapter, the only one she narrates herself, a second pregnancy with Fumbatha guarantees that the nursing school would not accept her with “this child growing inside me like that, and I will not. Will *not*” (145). The emphasis on “Will *not*” represents the refusal to accent the inauthenticity brought on by a maternal identity that would require her to undertake a second abortion. In addition, Fumbatha’s decision to desert her after he accuses her of killing “his” child, and the revelation that Zandile and not Gertrude was her real mother “uproots” Phephelaphi, denying her a place to “find new ground” (143). As Eisenberg notes, Phephelaphi is unable to accept this tainted self with a past rooted in lies and a future devoid of love (7). Phephelaphi herself explains: “for sure I had to forget about my June intake because there was no way they would accept me with this child ... I am not here ... I no longer belong. I am not here” (145-6). Although Vera presents the suicide in romanticized language in which Phephelaphi “seeks her own revenge” (148), she tempers the images with a chilling realism when the flames reduce Phephelaphi’s body to “an enticing spectacle of a severe horror” (148).

Ultimately, however, death for Phephelaphi comes much more easily and she dies knowing that “no matter when, no matter how she will eventually rise into her own song” (150), presumably, a song that is not predicated on Fumbatha’s love nor acceptance into the nursing school. In this context, Phephelaphi’s death is a self-affirmative suicide, because her refusal to be circumscribed within the maternal ethos of her society is an attempt to protect her self-identity. In her soliloquy, Phephelaphi clarifies that her

experiences with Fumbatha, the nursing school, and both Deliwe and Zandile's betrayal are too much for her and she will put a stop to her search: "I have been falling and falling and now it seems I have stopped falling. Stopped. Falling" (146).

In both *Without A Name* and *Butterfly Burning*, Vera brings to the surface the restricted lives women must live in a society formed and governed by rigid patriarchal and maternal values are forced to live. And as Grace Musila notes,

In exploding the silence surrounding these experiences and tearing apart the dense veil of taboo wrapped around women's sexual bodies, Vera affords these experiences both a language of speaking about them and visibility. She underlines the physicality of abortion, infanticide, and rape as embodied practices which are experienced firstly at a corporeal level by women. (Musila)

Thus, the novels zoom in on the ways these values are questioned and the tragic consequences of trying to negotiate around them. The solution and the way forward, Vera seems to suggest, is a defiance of the values or, a betrayal of them, in order to make Zimbabwean society equal and more humane.

## Chapter Four

### Reawakening the Repressed: The Body as Site of

#### Healing in Calixthe Beyala's *Your Name Shall be Tanga* (1988)

In this chapter, my concern is to examine how in African societies, with special emphasis on Cameroon, the female body that is considered an empty space, a lack and an absence, fights back to resist man's invasion and his inscriptions. While in Chapter Three I looked at the same concept of women's bodies, with Yvonne Vera aiming to redefine the script of motherhood and make it consonant with women's actual lived experiences, here I show how Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala conceives of the notion of women's bodies as sites of resistance. Beyala's thesis is based on the idea that certain individual women's choices and activities regarding their bodies are linked to power and the resistance of that power in a social world, or as Luce Irigaray says, "the female body does not remain an object of men's discourse, nor their many arts, but it becomes the principle for a female subjectivity that is experienced and chosen by women" (68). The bodies, conceptualized as sites of resistance, then become for women, either individually or in groups, ways through which they challenge the ideologies that perpetuate the unequal power distribution or the way power is implemented in a society.

Although it falls directly in the category of Western philosophy, Michel

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* offers relevant observations on the social restrictions that surround the question of women's bodies in an African context. Foucault demonstrates that social systems can be studied "on the basis of a political technology of the body, in which might be read a common history of power relations" (*Body* 171). Here, Foucault defines the social body, not as a signifying entity, but as a fluid surface or text on which social institutions inscribe meaning and interpretation. Later, he notes that there may be a "knowledge of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body" (*Body* 171). But because he doesn't explicitly discuss gender specific disciplinary practices on the body (he mostly gives examples from the military, prison and school), feminists have taken issue with him, accusing him of designating the body as gender neutral. Sandra Lee Bartky in particular is responsible for directing the discussion of Foucault's disciplinary practices to the examination of women's bodies.

In "Foucault, Feminism and the Modernization of Patriarchal power," Bartky explains that while women, like men, are subject to the disciplinary practices that Foucault highlights, their bodies are subjected to a slightly different embodiment that is peculiarly feminine (65). In contrast to Foucault, Bartky then anchors the disciplinary practices that affect the female body in terms of the way cultural imperatives of femininity get expressed through women's reproductive capability, cultural norms and male oppression. She looks at the body as a text of culture which refers "to the ways that our lived bodily experience is affected by the changes in social practices and cultural

categories, subsequently changing our bodies themselves” (McLaren 95).

It is these invigorating yet problematic aspects of the female body that I investigate in Beyala’s novel, *Your Name Shall be Tanga*. Beyala, born in the ghetto areas of Cameroon’s capital Yaoundé, saw the poverty and the exploitation of children and women first hand. This background allowed her to see the degrading social conditions in which these groups lived, and instead of merely chronicling their life stories in the fiction, she shows the cultural context into which they fit and the cultural landscape which they help to create. Not only is Beyala a prolific writer, but she is also one of the most successful women writers in Africa. In her five novels - *C’est le Soleil Qui M’a Brûlé* (1987), *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* (1988), *Seul le Diable le Savait* (1990), *Le Petit Prince de Belleville* (1992), and *Maman a un A mant* (1993) – she is intensely aware of the significance of the representations of the female body, in terms of a woman’s self awareness. Specifically, Beyala’s writings offer an original perspective on the manner in which society attempts to influence women’s conception of the female body and identity and her narratives propose unique, if somewhat radical responses to the situation women find themselves in, in traditional African society. Obviously, this keen interest in the lives of women and children put Beyala in direct contrast to the pioneers of the Cameroonian literary consciousness at the dawn of independence in 1972.

When most African countries attained independence, a proliferation of writings appeared, constituting a true aesthetic revolution in which innovative presentations of Africans’ lived experiences were formulated. In Cameroon in particular, there was a concerted effort to analyze and produce social understanding and reveal the workings of a

new society. As Richard Bjornson writes in *The African Quest for Freedom and Identity: Cameroonian Writing and the National Experience*, among the Cameroonian writers and intellectuals of the post -1972 period, there was widespread agreement that the promise of national independence had been compromised by materialistic individualism that found exaggerated expression in the conscious consumption of the privileged class (406). Many of these writers were disillusioned that the promise of independence was unfulfilled. Hence they devised an increasingly unified and self conscious national literature that contested the greed, corruption and favoritism of the new governments (406).

Yet for all the richness and diversity of the resultant literary tradition, it was the novels written by women that infused a sense of gender consciousness in the new literary aesthetic, thus distinguishing it from its earlier known modes. The women writers abandoned the fundamental belief that the new nation's cultural identity could only be attained through the writings of sanctioned heroic figures such as the self-taught poet-novelist-journalist-playwright Rene Philombe. According to Bjornson, Philombe, a populist revolutionary figure, believed that a "writer can best address problems of universal human concern by speaking to his own people and on their behalf" (148). Another popular writer, Louis-Marie Pouka sought, through poetry, to reinforce the government control over its people declaring that "all people are created in the image of God and they become free by loving others as much as they love themselves" (Bjornson 149).

In contrast to her male counterparts who focused on a nationalist view, Beyala stresses the complex portrayal of the social and communal fabrics of society. The focus

here shifts from a nation's search for its identity from the colonial masters to the portrayal of women who are caught between the shackles of the conservative African traditions and the general postcolonial disillusionment. Beyala observes her society and fictionalizes it, exposing the filth, contradictions and conflicts therein. In *Your Name shall be Tanga*, published in 1988 and set in a fictional country Iningue that bears an uncanny resemblance to Cameroon, Beyala evokes multiple frustrations encountered by the main character, Tanga, and her efforts to live a "normal" life. As Tanga explains, "in my country, a child is born old since he cannot carry the fragrance of springtime inside himself" (7-8). One of the two surviving children in a family of 12, Tanga is the daughter of a disoriented couple that lives in one of the slum areas that are found in Africa's emerging urban spaces. The novel spans three generations of women who symbolize the three stages in which the matriarchal communities of Africa have been eroded as society evolved from relatively stable pre-colonial communities to post-independence disillusionment. Tanga's grandmother, Kadjaba Dongo, represents the pre-independence period and is shown as a victim of the offensive control of patriarchy. Dongo, a princess in the king's court and a village beauty is raped because she wouldn't offer her body willingly. Her own response to the deed compounds her established status as an object to be disposed of by others. Even before she knows the identity of her masked rapist, Dongo offers her disowned body to anyone who would take her as she felt their "size, length, but didn't question it" (25). Viewing herself as the property of whatever man first penetrated her sexually, Dongo nonetheless refuses to be a victim of the traditional strictures of patriarchy. When she gives birth to a daughter Taba, she strips herself of everything "that wasn't herself to the point where she stood in everlasting negation of others" (25).

Taba, who would eventually become Tanga's mother, grows up as a "lost sheep, absent and guilty of not having known how to share her mother's despair" (25). Because she lacks the mother-daughter bond with Dongo, Taba is not equipped with the skills to become a good mother. Instead, at the dawn of her teenage years, she denies anything to do with sexuality and motherhood. She rejects her mother Dongo's fate, by blocking the symbol of motherhood, the womb from any violation. She plugs her vagina with nuts, hoping to "forget about the pleasure invented and constructed in bed" (26). Taba's rejection of womanhood as a social construction of women's specificity ironically parallels her mother Dongo's rejection of the maternal instinct. But despite her best efforts, her body is still violated by her husband who doesn't think she's worth much. Tanga, Taba's daughter is the product of post independence and unlike the former generations, she refuses to acquiesce to the forces that obliterate her maternal relatives. The novel traces Tanga's quest for freedom and identity, her desperate search for a self that is undefined by external forces and her desire to establish intimate personal relations.

In setting her story of the quest for embodied subjectivities for her women characters against a backdrop of a disintegrated African community, Beyala recounts the story of these women from the vantage point of those who have been marked as peripheral in the new urban communities of contemporary Africa. Throughout the novel, Beyala explores several such cultural displacements by which communities that were once caring and comforting have metamorphosed into alienated enclaves, thwarting the role of the African woman as caring and nurturing. The new urban communities in which these women find themselves are anonymous, leading to feelings of alienation and not

belonging. In particular, since most of these spaces aren't well governed, with no structures to accommodate the poor, women especially find themselves segregated into invisible hovels from which they dissolve at the end of each day.

In an interview with Rangira Gallimore, Beyala laments the disruption of Africa's matriarchal structures, explaining that the Beti society where she comes from was a matriarchal society in the beginning and women held powerful positions. She however notes that with the advent of Christianity and Islam the "patriarchal system replaced the matriarchal system and the society became deeply destructured, creating new relationships between man and woman" (qtd. in Cheryl Toman 122).

However, in contrast to the persistent constructions of the African woman as a victim of the new postcolonial urban spaces, Beyala, in the midst of all the despair and alienation writes prolifically about women negotiating and resisting the multiple oppressions that determine and shape their lives. As Cheryl Toman has observed, throughout Beyala's novel, there's a constant need "for female solidarity in order for women to remain or become empowered, and Beyala allows us to see how these manifestations of solidarity have been transformed in a troubled contemporary society" (129).

*Your Name Shall be Tanga* opens when Tanga, incarcerated in a prison cell and about to die, is telling her life-story to a white woman, Anna Claude, ensuring that her legacy is kept alive. Addressed in part to all women and children in Africa, *Your Name*, is an intricately designed literary piece, featuring a young woman who masters the art of

story-telling to ensure that her body is not erased. At the center of the novel, as Julia Nfah Abbenyi has commented, is “an indictment of human depravity in African urban slums, [and] of patriarchal society as a whole” (101). Through Tanga’s narrative, we learn about the events that have led to her rebellion and imprisonment: at six years old, her father rapes her, shattering her innocence and at 12 years, her mother forces her into prostitution, a trade she plies until she is 17 before she rebels. Most of the narrative takes place in a prison cell, where Tanga is about to die. But at 17, she cannot afford to die without telling her story. That’s why Anna Claude, a Jewish-French woman with whom she shares the prison cell, is captivated by the story. Anna Claude is a middle-aged French professor of Philosophy who travels to Africa in search of a fantasy; a handsome man named Ousmane whom she has waited for her entire life. But as her search for Ousmane proves futile by the day, she is confronted with the reality that is Africa where, “nothing happened. Instead, the hyenas of Iningue’s misery gathered around her – its fallen spectre, its tattered horizons, its vibrations of suffering” (61). While in Africa, Anna Claude sacrifices Hegel and Kant for the occult sciences. She invents her own philosophy where she affirms that the “meeting point of the world lay in the imaginary and that it would suffice to close one’s eyes, to listen to one’s own vibrations to reach it” (3). For this, she is labeled mad, “the kind of madness which asked questions without ever replying” (3). Before long, she is thrown into prison for protesting Iningue’s poor governorship when she traverses the streets with placards. “A subversive and uncontrollable element” (6), the commissioner brands her before incarcerating her. In Tanga’s self revelation, told in a continuous flow of disjointed and fragmentary stories that are devoid of chapter headings and divisions, Beyala emphasizes how an individual

woman's personal story can become a multiple narrative that is woven together through her subjective telling about the lives of those around her.

Tanga's psychological oppression begins the moment she is born. She describes her conception as the moment that destroyed her and at the same time gave birth to her. Her father, an abusive man, humiliates her mother by taking on other women and when he dies, he leaves the family destitute. The mother, Taba, dehumanized with no family heritage, having grown up as a vagabond following her mother, Dongo's rejection, develops a twisted sense of maternal love towards her daughter, whom she regards as a valuable instrument that would insure her in her old age. Because young girls learn from their mothers the survival skills, Taba inherits from her mother a lack of attachment and no sense of self. Tanga explains: "Not everything went according to the way the old one had foreseen it. The eye of misfortune had been sculpted in marble between her thighs. She gave birth to me. My father cheated on her" (27). Instead of shielding her daughter from the cycle of societal oppression, Taba's trauma forces her to become a part of the oppressive machinery, denying herself and her daughter the emotional and physical attention. When Tanga is 12 years old, her mother announces that she is old enough to start taking care of the entire family: "since you are here, since you are alive, have a seat on the debris of the ages; feed us with your body. We no longer know, you'll know for us" (27). The mother then promptly places Tanga's body on the market, expecting the girl-child to become a prostitute and earn money that will sustain the family.

Tanga's body, considered here in monetary terms, is then targeted for patriarchal violence and violation. Beyala, aware of how a woman's life is easily alienated by the

constant definition of her body as a partial object on which cultural scripts are written, strives to reverse the trend, showing that a woman isn't simply a passive object that adheres to the patriarchal demands. Beatrice Rangira Gallimore articulates this concern succinctly in her article "De l'alienation a la reappropriation du corps chez les romacieres de l'Afrique Norire Francophone”:

In Africa, ... it is through the body that society stabilizes and perpetuates itself. Thus, this body must be shaped, controlled and branded. The control of the body is translated through the verbal instructions regarding the way to maintain one's body, which is regulated by a code that determines good and bad behavior ... society, and more precisely a patriarchal society, brands the female body in order to ensure total control over woman and to prepare her for her role as passive receiver (qtd in Cazenave 126).

The body is thus not only stripped of subjectivity but of organic life itself.

However, the female subject as the recipient of this harsh treatment within the social narrative constructs a subject position of a rebellious figure, one that opens a new space on her alienated but ultimately fluid body. In her article “Embody-ing Theory: Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body,” Kathy Davis discusses how women specifically engage in feminist-aesthetics that empower the patriarchal constructed body by searching for a “symbolic space ... a possibility for experimenting with alternative identities” (12). Davis also considers in her discussion the fact that “bodies are not simply abstractions, however, but are embedded in the immediacies of

everyday, lived experience” (15).

In order to prepare Tanga for the prostitution market, her mother forces her to submit to female genital mutilation, a necessary rite of passage before she becomes a woman. “I can see her still, my mother old one, shimmering in her immaculate kaba, a black scarf in her hair, crying out to every god: ‘she has become a woman, she has become a woman. With that, ... she will keep any man” (12). The importance placed on female genital mutilation as a way to keep a man reflects the idea of a woman as an object that is at the mercy of her family and her future husband. The uncircumcised body is seen as deficient in patriarchal demands. In a society that expects sexual pleasure to be an exclusive entity for men, intact genitalia marks a woman as undisciplined, a non-conformist who occupies a rebellious space. In addition, as Nfah-Abbenyi notes,

the right to womanhood is here directly associated not only with sexual intercourse but also with institutionalized heterosexuality ... Tanga’s mother’s reaction demonstrates that clitoridectomy does not only define her daughter as a woman, that is to say she has crossed over from childhood to womanhood, but also captures the right that this act gives men to possess Tanga’s body. (104)

Thus by subjecting women to clitoridectomy, women elders in collusion with patriarchy diminish the woman, using tactics such as warning the young women that they will lack sexual appeal to imprison them within the feminine ideal.

The issue of female circumcision in Africa has drawn a lot of controversy.

African feminist critics like Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka and Obioma Nnaemeka equate the ritual to one of the many ways in which imperial discourses are expounded in Africa. In “Transcending the Boundaries of Power,” Ajayi-Soyinka highlights the symbolic status attached to the ritual, saying that Western imperialist discourses use the practice to construct African women’s identities and to show the brutal manifestation of male dominance (62). Ajayi-Soyinka particularly castigates Alice Walker’s novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in which, she claims, Walker “reduces the different personalities and multiple identities of women to one thing – the vulva” (62). She explains that while the novel is committed to a humanistic cause – exposing the horrors of female genital mutilation – its artistic creation nonetheless participates in denouncing a culture that condones the mutilation of a helpless group of people on the African continent. Ajayi-Soyinka ultimately condemns Walker for once again trying to solve Africa’s problems through Western lenses. Nnaemeka, echoing Ajayi-Soyinka’s sentiments, condemns Western women activists for engaging in a crusade against female genital mutilation without analyzing the communities in which the practice occurs. Like Ajayi-Soyinka, Nnaemeka too is very critical of Walker, saying that her humanitarian effort in the film *Warrior Masks* in which she exposes the horrors of female genital mutilation in West Africa, overplays female genital mutilation that is no longer practiced in some African communities; she argues that African women aren’t simply passive figures on whom the practice is bestowed.

What both Nnaemeka and Ajayi-Soyinka are saying is that Western critics have to consider the particularities of the practice, the why and how it is practiced. In some

African communities, especially those in northern, western and eastern Africa, a girl undergoes circumcision to fulfill a rite of passage to adulthood, and become eligible for marriage. As a custom, it is deemed to ensure family honor and purification, especially if the circumcised girl remains a virgin until her wedding day. The ceremony is an occasion for celebration and jubilation and a lot of gifts are exchanged. The rituals embedded in a series of activities prepare the girls from an early age to internalize a sense of servility, as they await their subordinate and pleasure giving roles as soon to be wives and mothers. Ultimately, the circumcised girls become more marketable and are easily accepted by society. But because the repercussions of female circumcision far outweigh the considered benefits, feminist critics of both the African and Western philosophy have waged a campaign to eliminate the practice.

In the case of Tanga's subjection to female genital mutilation in Beyala's text, the practice serves to illustrate how hard it is to mobilize against the ritual, especially if it is perpetuated by the victim's close relatives like Tanga's mother. Unlike Ajayi-Soyinka and Nnaemeka who look at the practice as an academic imperialist discourse, Beyala construes female genital mutilation as a practice that violates a woman's body. For her, the ordeal of circumcision demonstrates that the practice has jeopardized the security of women in African societies. This is what Tanga says after the ordeal:

I didn't weep. I didn't say a thing. I fell heir to the blood between my legs.  
To a hole between my thighs. All that I was left with was the law of  
oblivion. Time passed, I was becoming accustomed to that part of me that  
was gone. I kidnapped the horde of memories. I tied them up with string. I

shoved them deep inside the drawers of time. (12)

In this quote, all Tanga can recall is an unfulfilled space between her thighs after she is circumcised. As she explains, she is simply left with a sense of lack and what she loses, she can never recover. Altered after circumcision, Tanga literally becomes a shell of her former person and like other countless women who undergo the ritual of female circumcision, Tanga finds it hard to repress the memory of the painful act. Moroccan writer Nawal El Sadaawi in addressing the traumatic experience of female circumcision points out the nightmare of the unknown a victim goes through as she tries to rebuild her life: “I had a feeling of insecurity, of the unknown waiting for me at every step I took into the future... society had made me feel, since the day that I opened my eyes on life, that I was a girl, and that the word *Bint* (girl) was pronounced by anyone is almost always accompanied by a frown” (8-9).

For feminists concerned with body politics, the challenge is to find how women can reclaim control of their bodies, altering the ways in which they are read and how they read themselves. Honi Fern Haber in “Foucault Pumped: Body Politics and the Muscled Woman,” explains that there is only one possibility of re-signifying women’s bodies: “to confuse, or perhaps to refuse, traditional gender distinctions, to problematize phallogocentric readings and readings of women’s bodies” (139). Haber’s observations are valid. Without patriarchal logocentricism, without the adherence to the law of the father, there would be less repression, and more of women’s choices. What could be added to Haber’s proposal is that as scholars problematize the phallogocentric readings of women’s bodies, so should they pay attention to how the women respond to the many realities of

their lived experiences.

Despite the traumatic experience, Tanga is able to “kidnap” the memories of the circumcision, tying them up with a “string ... deep inside the drawers of time” (12). This metaphor imaginatively describes her split female body that follows the act of circumcision, but at the same time, offers her a psychic site of healing. The act of “kidnapping the memories,” allows her to navigate the dominant cultural ideologies that she encounters on the streets of Iningue as a prostitute. In the scene where she meets her first client, Hassan, Tanga explains that she met him through his body parts:

I met Hassan through his legs. I can see them still, grey trousers fitting them like a glove, crumpled around his penis and his belly. ... Hassan’s legs. I see them parade before me. They move ahead, straight in my line of vision; they are laying the egg of desire in my body. Although the idea disgusts me, I know that these long legs which contract as he walks, despise women incapable of arousing groans of pleasure and hold the others in contempt. (10)

The young woman is able to note each detail of Hassan’s “legs” because as a child, her father had conditioned her never to look elders in the face. A child must keep its eyes lowered, her father had always told her. In response, she acquired a gaze that always watched everything, especially people’s legs from her vantage point of lowered eyes from which she would give meaning to her social world. By appropriating the hitherto exclusive male gaze, Tanga gains considerable agency through her ability to read the

physical body and interpret its social significance.

By simply observing Hassan's legs, Tanga reads in his body a sign of arrogance, and after naming the client's vice, she vows that he will not control her: "I raise my eyes. Before me stands arrogance itself. I classify it, put it where it belongs" (10). Thus, as Hassan subjugates Tanga's body by forcefully raping her, we are at the same time reminded of her subjective will power because through her gaze, she embodies a network of relations, rather than a single role of object. Hassan, the embodiment of the powerful male gaze, obviously does not recognize Tanga's resistance and continues to subjugate her body to his desires:

Hassan takes me in his arms. Step by step, without letting go of me, he pushes me towards the bed. He collapses on top of my belly. "Kiss me," he demands. His lips subjugate me. He grabs one of my legs, then the other, puts them over his shoulders. He penetrates me. His steps cut through me. Woman's existence comes to me now. I hadn't known it, yet I recognize it. A memory engraved in the darkness of time. My body breaks loose, thumps, beats against the walls and partitions my life. He soaks me. I push, it's new to me, I am transformed into an enormous wave. (19)

A special significance of this excerpt consists in uniting the discourses of the female body and pain. Here, Hassan experiences Tanga's body primarily for its luscious pleasure for him, and he does not acknowledge the resultant violence and pain. The most potent weapon available for men in subjugating women is through rape. As Susan Brownmiller

explains in *Against Our Will*,

rape [is] ... not only a male prerogative, but man's basic weapon of force against woman, the principal agent of his will and her fear. His forcible entry into her body, despite her physical protestations and struggle, [is] ... the vehicle of his victorious conquest over her being, the ultimate test of his superior strength, the triumph of his manhood. (14)

Hassan here doesn't even see Tanga as a sexual object; rather, seen as simply an object of rape and violence she functions as a manifestation of unlimited privilege for the men.

Tanga's invisibility in Hassan's eyes is further manifested when, after the violent act, he erases her innocence in his consciousness. He does not see the small and skinny girl with frizzy hair that stands in front of him. Rather, in her, he sees a grown up woman, with a slender frame and "big ass". "You have green eyes, heavy breasts, your hair comes right down your buttocks. That arouses me" (18). Tanga is simply reduced to those body parts that arouse Hassan because he constructs the rest of her as not worth the effort of seeing.

From this moment however, Tanga resolves never to be used by men again. She carefully scrutinizes Hassan and comes to the conclusion that he and his ilk, all those men "pulsing with the same behavior, pierced by the same heat" (21) simply exist to exploit her body. From henceforth, she resolves to "arm [herself] against unhappiness" (21) by taking men, not on their terms but on her own terms. She also gains a voice, and determines to order her own story: "I'll give it the breath of amorous fables, I'll murder my monsters and I'll offer them in sacrifice to the heavenly powers" (21). Elizabeth

Grosz in “The Body of Signification,” argues that the body is “the central object over and through which relations of power and resistance are played out” (81). Subjects in her view are produced through the process of inscribing meaning on the body. This view echoes Bartky who also believes that the feminine body is a construct, a “body on which an inferior status has been inscribed” (71). Bartky speaks of ways through which society’s disciplinary powers control women’s perceived “docile bodies” to the extent that the exercise becomes perpetual and exhaustive like a “regulation of the body’s size, contours, its appetite, posture, gestures, and the general comportment in space and appearance of each of its visible parts” (80). However, Tanga’s decision to take men on her own terms serves to subvert the “docility” that Hassan and other clients like Monsieur John, a senior government official with a Mercedes-Benz, diamond, and a Rolex watch, seek to inscribe on her body. When later she returns home that night, the heroine looks her mother in the eyes and announces that from henceforth, she will place her desires and aspirations before everything: “From now on, I’ll put myself before everything. Before the world, me; after the world, me; always me” (38). Tanga strategically employs her position as a deviant subject, which is no longer “entangled in the array of colors” and one in whom “only the spirit counts” (39) to illuminate the inscription of the subject through various discursive structures.

By re-signifying the act of prostitution, Tanga cuts the bonds that tie her with sexual exploitation. She redefines her designated role as a call girl and instead of being excluded from and denied by the normative cultural expectations, she instead asserts a counter hegemonic discourse. She resists the dichotomization of the prostituted body as

worthless, and instead constructs on its site an empowered self. As a way to ensure her body's integrity, she blocks her vagina with a "lump of clay encrusted with gravel" (102). The action, which Tanga describes as "concealing a viper inside [her] Vagina" (103), becomes integral to the acknowledgement of her own body and sexuality, which becomes a site of self-examination and self-knowledge. Thus, while Tanga's mother wanted her body on the market, and her clients wanted it for pleasure, she wants to "put an end to [her] body's vomiting" (73). She wants to embrace the body, to rediscover in the process, her long lost virginity. "From now on, I shall be happy. I'm holding happiness hostage" (73). She literally removes herself from the sexual economy, denying that the purpose of her body is to bear children or to please men. By targeting the womb, Tanga eliminates herself from the reproductive ability, rendering herself barren. And, as Nancy Arenberg, addressing questions of body subversion in relation to women, writes, "her [Tanga's] desire for auto-mutilation allows the reader to identify another example of body fragmentation" (114).

The deliberate rejection of prostitution as it is sanctioned by society transforms Tanga's body from that of a sexualized to an asexualized body. Her body becomes an example of the female body that rebels against society's gaze. She explains: "I do not want to lend my womb to the unfurling of a life. So many children already loiter in the streets! I despise feeding the statistics" (120). She restricts her mothering role to that of a nurturer, when she takes on the responsibility of looking after Mala, a 12-year-old street child whom she rescues from the streets of Iningue. Mala's story replicates the trauma that Iningue's children go through. The narrator notes that Mala's birth was occasioned

by his mother “let[ting] various men take their turn and ride her as the waves ride the sea” (52). She abandons him in a cardboard box where maggots devour part of his limbs, and later his grandmother, a senile old woman who nicknames him “Foot-wreck” (52) rescues him from the darkness.

At 16 and determined to make a meaningful life for herself, Tanga first meets Mala in the weeks following her feminist triumph over both her mother and clients, as she loiters aimlessly in the streets. Immediately, she asks him to become her child. “I want to raise you, take you to school fix your pepe soup for you, iron your clothes. I want to teach you how to believe in Santa Claus” (74). Tanga’s relationship with Mala disrupts the normative expectation that creates a category of “woman” (the symbolic woman) as either a sexual object or reproductive machine. The period in which Tanga plays mother to Mala is the happiest in her life, because then, she chooses how her body responds to its erotic and maternal demands. Mala learns to call her mother, humanizing their relationship, and when she lets him suckle on her breasts, the young boy is reborn: “I’d take out one breast. He’d suckle. He’d fall asleep. In my happiness, I’d worry about his. At one and the same time, we were each other’s saviors” (130). Tanga seeks in Mala a chance to create a loving and functional family, where she acts as an intuitive nurturer, while Mala gets a chance to experience what it means to be a child. As Susan Arndt observes, “in him [Mala], she seeks a piece of nuclear family, as well as her own lost childhood. Mala and Tanga exchange long-dreamed of tender gestures” (169). The two children adopt a dog and while they live a nomadic life, shifting from shelter to shelter, together they make life meaningful.

While Tanga begins as the sort of woman who does not want to have children because the men in her life simply see her as “a piece of meat” (93), her adoption of Mala ensures that she will have someone with whom she can connect intimately. Prior to this moment, all the people in her life had expected something from her. She tells Anna Claude that from the moment she entered the world, she assumed the role of necessity, doing everything so others could survive. She explains that all her life has been dictated by the obligation towards her parents since “it’s fitting that I sell my flesh to feed them, to feed them always because of the breath of life they gave me” (18). Thus, it is only when she adopts Mala that she finds a new sign, a sign of the child, a sign of creativity and of freedom. In mothering Mala, Tanga regains a moment of her lost innocence and for the first time, acquires a relationship that isn’t built on exploitation. Because Mala too missed out on a nurturing family bond, he implores Tanga “to start right back at the beginning” (105) if she is to mother him. Tanga willingly obliges:

His voice dwindles. The tears he tried to control escape from his eyes. I open my blouse. I bend down so that his mouth is at the level of my breasts. I force his lips open. He’s breathing hard, snorting. I insist, he gives in and suckles, slowly, very slowly. His eyes are disturbed as if they were jutting out over a ravine and it might be better to watch out for the wedding of heaven and earth. (105)

This is the moment that Tanga earns her sanity back; she gets reborn. She imagines a moment of sexual satisfaction, when her body, suckled by a grown-up child, expands and unites. When she describes the connection of her body to Mala’s as “the wedding of

heaven and earth,” she indicates a possession that represents the reconstituted female figure. Instead of Tanga’s body taking on the connotation of a blank page on which patriarchal values represented by her male clients impose a silence, the mothering of Mala allows her fragmented, dismembered female body to regroup and become her own subject; or as Hele’ne’ Cixous suggests in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the speaking body here takes “pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures” (887).

Beyala cites Tanga’s voluntary mothering of a grown-up child to establish a contrast to what ordinarily goes on in this society. In Iningue, a woman’s body is chiefly positioned as an idealized maternal construct at the expense of nurturance. Beyala writes: “In Iningue, the woman has forgotten the child, the gesture that brings love – she’s just an egg-laying hen” (57). In this particular society, the idea is compounded by the governor who encourages women to aspire to lofty ideals by handing out “medals to women who have large families” as they enhance the “service[s] rendered to the fatherland” (57). When the governor visits Iningue and fails to acknowledge Taba’s efforts despite having given birth to twelve children, Taba is slighted, and considers herself a forgotten mother, who expected to be crowned. She writes the governor a disenchanted letter:

My very dear, well-beloved Governor, good day. It is a forgotten mother who writes to you. How is your health and that of your children? No great problems here. As for me, I am not in good health. You forgot to call me the other day to give me a medal and this is bothering me a lot; not I can

no longer sleep. So, my son, I am coming to you now, to solicit your high-placed goodwill and arrange for this to happen quickly. And if you do not come, who would you wish to send in your place? You are the leader of us all. Other than that, all is well. (59)

The letter serves to highlight the harsh expectations to which women must adhere. Visualizing herself in the Governor's acknowledgement through the medal, and yearning for a recognition in society, Taba adapts visions and perceptions of the patriarchal standards of a woman. She believes that fulfilling the ideal of motherhood by raising many children deserves a medal. She further explains in the letter that although she gave birth to twelve children and ten died, she would still "give my belly up to life if God wants it so. And God will want it so since my insides are clean very beautiful" (59).

The reiteration of Taba's painful insistence that she would gladly offer her womb to have more children confirms that without motherhood – in this case without having so many children – she believes that a woman's life is bereft of meaning. Nfah-Abbenyi notes that Taba's letter "captures the cultural and political construction of a dispossessed body ... a body that conforms to the metaphor of the prison in which Tanga tells her story" (106). Taba's construction of herself as a dutiful "laying hen" and her pathetic attempt to appropriate a legitimate space for herself as a medal winner point to the coerciveness of the structures of patriarchal expectations. Her body serves to merely function as an instrument for the fulfillment of that collective maternal responsibility.

Not to be outwitted by the Governor's apparent lack of endorsement for her child

manufacturing womb, Taba, yearning for recognition soon learns, and subsequently teaches her daughter, that “money alone, clean or dirty, allows [one] to live. Cash-love, cash-love” (50). Aware that she would never receive the attention nor acceptance from her husband – he had once said that her womanhood had “set before the sun” (29), – Taba develops a desire for money, believing that money brings with it the desired sense of security. Unfortunately, because her own body would not matter on the market, Taba instead invests in her daughter’s body whose value can accrue the money that would protect her “from decay and hold death at bay” (23). Her daughter’s body affords her the opportunity not only to start over, but also to keep her present life. As the narrator notes: “she isn’t pushed by greed mother old one. No. All that is there is the frantic desire to put a halt to the gusts of misfortune” (23). She tries to avoid the misfortune of the countless Iningue women who had died, not only from societal oppression but from a lack of economic means. She “wanted to work her way around destiny” (23).

Ultimately however, Beyala privileges the voice of the individual over her society. In the absence of a network of community members ready to assist and nurture the women, and make it their business to look after each other, the women in this society who feel isolated from their past and alienated from their present look elsewhere for a self-affirming context. Their attempts to negotiate the meaning of their traumatized bodies can only be re-articulated within the confines of female bonding. When Tanga refuses to prostitute her body, and gets thrown out of her mother’s house, she roams the streets where she bonds with fellow prostitutes like Camilla, whose story is a “mixture of sorrow and delight from which her body emerges without any memory or past, that body

in which other bodies move around without brain or memory” (78). Abandoned by her lover, Pierre, Camilla puts her body to use since all that remains for her is the flesh and “she had to survive” (83). Her soul weighed down with Pierre’s thoughts, Camilla reinterprets her body; she places it in a market economy where the “men would pass through” and she “wouldn’t ask them for the promises of bedazzlement – for feelings” (83). In the absence of alternate lifestyles which might validate and endorse a kind of virtue not tied to a woman’s body, Camilla’s body becomes a commodity that caters to the demands of men who discover in her the “warm slit” that receives them “until they [are] sated” (83).

Since there’s nowhere to express her pain in the outside world, Camilla keeps her trauma to herself, only opening up to Tanga, within the confines of a restroom space. Although Camilla tells her story in an effort to connect with those in “this profession” (79), the space in which she contains her testimony creates a painful rift within the psyche of the young listener, Tanga, who inherited prostitution and its dehumanizing effects. “She tells me of the horrors, the murders she’s committed against herself. She discloses that buried past which she’d meant to unearth, to shed light on” (81). Yet for Camilla, the telling of her story serves to render into the public sphere a secret knowledge of her life and therefore of herself. She struggles to understand the sexual abuse the men subject her to because everywhere she passes men shout: “love you, Camilla!” “I’m drooling over you, darling!” “help me to forget my wife! ... make me live; make me come alive!” (79). Camilla nonetheless emerges with a new voice ready to testify. The telling of her story allows her to uncover the unspoken truths of her body and seek to escape the

all-consuming forces of a collective injustice that aligns the women of Iningue with danger and instability. In her testimonies Camilla articulates the need to identify with a sympathetic ear like Tanga's and forget the rhetoric that has reduced her to a drug that cures lustful men: "with Camilla, just looking at her is almost enough to satisfy you" (83).

Camilla's story becomes an act of remembering as the young woman reconstructs her memory. Smith and Watson discuss memory as a personal process of meaning-making that, when shared, becomes a collective process of writing oneself into the social collective. Camilla's act of remembrance becomes collective in nature, drawing upon "social sites of memory, historical documents, and oral narratives" (Smith and Watson 20). The act allows the two women to articulate their identities in the restroom, constructed here as a nurturing space. The space allows them to create an alternative situation in which they dream up new roles.

The same goes for Anna-Claude, the French Jewish woman who left France for Iningue, in search of an imaginary African man, Ousmane, whom she invented and "fashioned to fit her dreams" (3). Serving as an important link in the telling of Tanga's story, Anna-Claude's story is Beyala's critical look at the exploitation of women's bodies across borders. Anna-Claude provides inspiration and precedent for Tanga's eventual decision to open up and tell her own story. In Anna-Claude's words, telling one's story delivers one from oppression: "Give me your story," she tells Tanga. "I'm your deliverance. You have to assassinate that silence you drag behind you like a dead skin" (6-7). As Margaret Rosser observes, the telling of the stories suggests an "openness to a

very different story that challenges one's most entrenched beliefs about identity" with the novel gesturing "towards a communication and sharing beyond local, national, and ethnic communities" (223).

When Anna-Claude and Tanga find themselves in prison – Tanga for dealing in counterfeit currency because she needed money to sustain Mala and Anna-Claude for failing to keep the laws of Iningue - they work to accede to a space of openness. One trajectory of the novel is to show that their decision to tell each other's story enables them to heal from the trauma. This dimension of the narrative helps clarify the idea that in African cultural assimilation, woman is always assumed as prevalent and already formed. Anna-Claude, the immigrant, is supposedly an alien who cannot understand the cultural norms of Iningue. In fact, critics like Nfah-Abbenyi read in the fusion of both women's identities a creation of "an essentialist feminist utopia for marginalized women or those others of society" (110). For her, such an act on Beyala's part shows a construction of an identity "that at the same time erases race, class, and difference" (110).

In another register, however, the resultant bond between Tanga and Anna-Claude serves to emphasize, not the essentialist notions that Nfah-Abbenyi cites, but an alternative mode of embodiment that threatens to disrupt the patriarchal conceptions of femininity through its emphasis on female bonding.

Their bodies intertwine. Anna-Claude weeps. Tanga traces grooves of tenderness on her neck and her loins. She tells her not to cry, that they have only just become acquainted with the nightmare, but that the embrace

is the reality.

“You are right woman. We mustn’t stray from the dream.”

“You do understand then, though none too soon!” the dying woman jokes.

“Yes, we must live the dream. Tonight, You’ll be Ousmane, my dream.”

“I shall give you fertility.”

“I shall give myself to you.”

“I’ll make you some kids to perpetuate other kinds of human beings.”

“Love me”. (44-45)

This exchange is significant. Just as Tanga gives permission to Anna-Claude to be named Tanga, Anna-Claude too names Tanga her Ousmane – that elusive lover she had come looking for in Africa. For this one night, each woman will materialize into the other’s dream, with Tanga becoming Ousmane and giving Anna-Claude the fertility to bear children. The narrative also serves to function as a medium through which the writer, Beyala, expresses her version of the past events in order to show the complex nature of the present. The portrayal of Tanga and Anna Claude in such a setting has prompted critics to affirm that Beyala’s characters are always engaged in lesbian relations<sup>7</sup>. Marc

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<sup>7</sup> Beyala apparently underestimated the conflict her readers might experience in reading about her characters who arouse intense feelings of angst especially among the masculine world. Tunde Fatunde in “Calixthe Beyala’s Rebels Against Female Oppression” notes how a close study and analysis of Beyala’s “feminist discourse reveals that it is broadly provocative, raw and ‘pornographic’” (75). He also says that most of Beyala’s novels “are

Epprecht in *Heterosexual Africa?: The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* writes that Tanga in this excerpt is the “active seducer in a lesbian encounter with a co-prisoner” (148). But Beyala dismisses such cultural constructions of her text saying:

I think that those who see lesbianism in my writing are quite simply perverted since tenderness between women doesn't necessarily imply lesbianism. How can we explain to Westerners that in traditional Africa, intimate relations between persons of the same sex are not defined as homosexual? (qtd. in Hitchcott 27).

Beyala's protestations echo Adrienne Rich's sentiments in her classic essay, “Compulsive Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence.” Here Rich theorizes about what she terms a “Lesbian Continuum,” a “range ... of women identified experiences ... [that] embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life; the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support” (349). The lesbian continuum as Rich conceives it is about female bonding in a way that women can share their lives, but also a means through which they break taboos associated with their socially scripted roles. The originality of Tanga's story lies in its capacity to connect a lasting bond with Anna-

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filled with erotic scenes in which the male and female reproductive organs are described in crude and uncouth language” (75). The recurring derogation by the critics of the “unconventional” Beyala characters reflects a continued desire to see a mould of characters that are subordinate where subordination is lacking. It appears that in flagrantly flaunting the expected “feminine” mould, Beyala's unconventional characters through their defiance of man's will and expectations become empowered.

Claude who will pass it on when she dies. If Tanga represents woman's rudimentary resistance against her biological destiny, then Anna-Claude represents a more intellectualised approach to femininity as she embarks on teaching Tanga a conscious awareness of their bodies.

One specific example in which Anna-Claude practices what she teaches, comes when the prison chief beats and rapes her, as he demands that she tells all she knows about Tanga. Because Tanga wouldn't speak to anyone else in prison, preferring as she says to "die in peace," (7), the prison authorities interrogate Anna-Claude for clues about the young woman. But Anna-Claude refuses to divulge Tanga's story and instead conspires to keep it safe within her, by "learning about the flight of survival" (127). Following her own line of thinking, she discovers a way to solve what for her is an ontological problem, some way that could allow her "body [to] absent itself, [and] overtake its shadow" (127). In a split moment, she picks a shard, and slits her palms burrowing deep in her skin. This violent gesture carries with it the implication that the prison officer who has been draining Anna-Claude's life will have the power to do so no more. The shard allows her to dismember herself, there by denying her tormentors the right to possess her body wholly.

At the end of the novel, when Tanga presumably has died from her wounds, we are presented with Anna-Claude in the image of 17-year-old Tanga. By fusing the two women's bodies, the narrator sets up the importance of passing on the story by constructing a collective narrative. When Tanga's mother visits the prison, seeking her daughter, Anna-Claude proudly tells her that she's the said daughter.

“My girl. Tell me, what have they done with my daughter,” she groans.

“Your daughter?”

“Yes, my daughter. She was locked up here with you. Tell me ...”

“I am your daughter.”

“Not you,” the woman says in an irritated voice, “my daughter, Tanga.”

“That’s me...” (137)

Sigrid Kohler reads in this fusion of the two women’s identities an exchange of bodily gifts that are instrumental in disrupting Iningue’s regulatory power perpetrators. He says that the “body gift of the two women creates speech in a marginalized position” constituting a “speaking body” (37) that is against and not within the regulatory power machinery. In the same breath, Susan Arndt also views the fusion of the women’s bodies as a challenge to the main discourse of African feminisms and African feminist writers who for long have had difficulties in supporting each other. The alliance that the two women form allows Beyala to construct a discourse where “a kind of fundamental consensus to which the partially different problems and concerns of all women can be reduced” (Arndt 175).

My examination of Beyala’s intentional connection of the traumatic loss of control of the two women’s bodies reveals a link between institutionalized misogyny and the sexual traumatization of women. Beyala, through vast anecdotes of women’s sexual victimization, probes the cultural exploitation of women, reworking the script of a

woman's body as a blank text on which cultural mores get to be inscribed. Her attempt to recover Tanga's body from both her mother and clients' sexual framing becomes a quest to restore her female identity which empowers her to define her own erotic terms. In doing so, Beyala demonstrates that there's a need to balance the presentation of a woman's body, especially the prostituted body, as an abused as well as empowered body. Beyala also underscores the damage that can result from the cultural idealization of womanhood as she illustrates not only the oppression of women in a patriarchal system but also women's cultural blindness to their own victimization as well as the victimization of other women.

## Conclusion

In her essay “The Female Writer and her commitment,” Molara Ogundipe-Leslie exhorts the African woman writer to be aware of her art as she seeks to give it her all. She expects the writer to “be committed to her vision,” but most importantly, to “tell her own truth, and to write what she wishes to write” (63). The call follows what Ogundipe-Leslie calls the “mystification” of the African woman found in mostly male writers’ works of art where the African woman falls in two categories – the sophisticated city girl and the rural woman. Ogundipe-Leslie explains that both these figures are “often shallow, exaggerated and false” (59). In addition, she implores women writers to take into consideration the various social predicaments in their societies and situate the awareness and solutions to the African woman’s predicament in the larger global context of imperialism and neo-colonialism (65). It could be debated whether the writers I have considered in this project follow Ogundipe-Leslie’s call to the letter, but certainly, they achieve two aspects: they tell their truth and they write what they wish to write.

My primary interest in this project has been to articulate the sites of enunciation in which the characters in the texts are made to engage with their fragmented conditions. I’ve shown that while each writer employs a different methodology, the act of seeking a “third space” is their attempt to address the wounds and effects of patriarchy and colonialism. We have also seen how the writers construct the story of the African woman

as a “negotiation” that embraces the loss of self as both tragic and liberating, reinforcing Trinh T. Minh-ha’s view that women should reconstitute themselves so as to escape external definitions. When discussing how women have been “defined” and “dehumanized,” Trinh in *Women, Native, Other* contends:

You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-re-education-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your reality, your voice – you know. And often you cannot say it. You try to keep on to unsay it, but please – we must say it – they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said. (80)

Trinh is speaking of the very issues that the African women writers are concerned with – how to effectively position the African woman in relation to patriarchy so that she is not externally defined. The writers are acutely aware of the need for the women to speak their own truths and realities, because if they fail, the dominant system will speak for them. In all the works I examine, I show that while the gendered ideologies are clearly visible and widespread, a distinct counter-narrative is also at work: the stories are about exploration, survival, challenging limits and glimpsing new prospects. As we have seen, for Flora Nwapa who led the African woman writer on the international scene, the task was to articulate a symbolic narrative act in order to free her protagonist from the psychological damage of culture, while Mariama Ba employs the written word to re-write her heroine back into culture. Writing from a parallel position of marginality, that of a war traumatized country, Yvonne Vera figures a different narrative of “monstrous” mothers with its twisted sense of transformation in the hopes of restituting loss. All this is

accomplished against a background of extreme pain meted on the maternal body. For Calixthe Beyala, bodies are remade through embodied subjectivities with emphasis placed on the act of female bonding that records the secret transformations and reinventions of identities.

Because the privileging of man in African societies has involved an erasure of identities and subjectivities of many women, it invariably follows that reconstituting this cultural erasure is a hard and tenuous journey. When women try to claim status as individuals, cultural expectations such as their maternal roles act as constant bottlenecks to return them back to their prescribed roles as subordinate beings. There's always a reminder that a woman's place is to be found in the domestic sphere and her voice is not to be heard. Thus, while, as I noted in chapter one, most criticism that deals with women's subjectivity invests in the articulation of voice especially for marginalized women who are often denied the opportunity to say who they are, authors like Vera examine the very modes of these silences and portray them as socially constructed mediums. In *Under the Tongue*, Vera demonstrates that silence is a process of healing for a young girl, Zhizha and her grandmother. When 10-year-old Zhizha is raped and retreats "under the tongue," Vera wants us to construe this silence as a multiplicity of meaning and her purpose is to "say" the "unsayable". Her novel protests the understanding that silence is a lack of voice. She demonstrates that the horrendous act of rape could be overcome by a silence that is invested with meaning. She places Zhizha and Grandmother into a "third space," a narrative arena that allows the two women to become aware of "the secrets of [their] growing" (209). To unsay, for Vera, involves a careful

acknowledgement of the fact that sometimes speech can be the cause of erasure from society.

In Chapter Two, we saw the epistolary novel as an art of correspondence and a cultural venue. Ramatolaye's words to her friend Aissatou underline two things: first the significance of a writer-reader interaction and second, the exchange of roles that art entails. The recurrent theme in Ramatolaye's correspondence is an aspiration to transform her life. She believes that she should create a life that has more affinity with the modern woman her French teacher had led her to believe she could become. In addition, her role as the writer and chronicler of her life is not confined to her activity as a catalyst that gathers together the scenery around her. It goes beyond to the art and practice of conversation that were once aspects of a successful female society in pre-colonial African society. Ramatolaye has no choice but to speak as a woman who has to regain control of her life. When she is first segregated into mourning, her goal is to make her predicament known to Aissatou and eventually, to bring her plight into focus for the women folks at large. The question, however, of whether she could affect change through her letter without compromising her cultural beliefs is one that she has to grapple with. Her narrative of the events in her life provides a story based on the trajectories of development. As I explain, the formation of Ramatolaye's identity involves her conceptualization of her society's repression of herself. She will not vacate her marital home despite being abandoned by her husband. Instead, she uses the home as the space to articulate her desires. She subtly explores her desire for a forward looking man and she feels she cannot marry a man like Dauda Dieng because she no longer sees herself as the

type to get back into a polygamous household. In other words, she begins to see herself in a larger picture and in many ways, “hope still lives within [her]” (*So Long* 89).

Chapter Three examined the philosophy and myth of the African designated maternal body in which Vera crafts strategies that permit the foregrounding of the mothers’ subjectivity. The power of the “good” wife discourse in Africa as a woman who bears many children is such that it obliterates the right of generations of women in contemporary Africa to voice their desire to assert themselves against fulfilling the expected maternal ethos. Instead, women are required to accede to the mythological maternal attributes such as the innate capacity to nurture, reproduce and extend society. As the icon of socialized maternity, the mother in Africa is required to follow the patriarchal script that is laid out within the social mores. Accordingly, the only legitimate space for her in which she could be allowed to enter the symbolic order is if she fulfills her position as society’s mother. In seeking to theorize this subjugation of the maternal, the study turned to the work of Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, in which the author’s feminist critique of the institution of motherhood illuminates the unfair situation in which many women who are mothers find themselves. Rich states that “patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms: therefore, they are treated as axioms, as ‘nature’ itself, and not open to question” (43).

Vera does question the very treatment of the axiom of motherhood and contests the idea that all women are obliged to be mothers. Her books written in different modes of modernity, or what Chimalum Nwankwo calls the “weaving or stitching ... of the

vibrant essences into the story lines” (50), distance themselves from the received notions of maternity, and locate their thematics firmly within a thorough critique of how women experience motherhood. The story of Vera’s mothers subverts the collusion between the African mythical expectations of mothers and the violence meted on the maternal body. The mothers or would be mothers refuse to succumb to the patriarchal mechanisms by refusing to participate in the institution. Instead, the two texts expose the frustration of the women and the strategies they craft to disrupt the maternal corpus. When Phephelaphi rejects her femininity by aborting Fumbatha’s child, she is implicitly rejecting that side of her which has no status according to the expectations of the masculine world. She also rejects her mother’s world which subscribes to the notion that women can amount to nothing in a man’s world. Instead, she seeks a self with an “outline” recognizing the fact that finding oneself is the most important aspect of identity formation. And when at the end she realizes that perhaps she cannot completely escape the oppressive world that demands obedience and conformity from women, in which male domination is unquestioned, Phephelaphi chooses “to take her revenge” by killing herself. (*Butterfly Burning* 148)

In Chapter Four, my aim has been to establish how Calixthe Beyala redefines the female body from its conception in phallogocentric terms. Tanga, the protagonist in *Your Name Shall be Tanga* is trapped in the conceptual shape framed principally by her mother and male clients, which constructs, and in turn, condemns her status as a prostitute. The same distorting mirror is held up to her mother, Taba, and the French Jewish woman, Anna-Claude. Seeing the necessity of freeing women from the tyranny of the inscribed

body with its perceived duality of presence/absence, Beyala seeks to restore to the African woman, or to her fictional counterpart, not only an imagined reality, but also a human nature that is capable of bonding and finding comfort with other women.

Thus in *Your Name Shall be Tanga*, Beyala constructs an “unruly” female body that refuses to remain sequestered within the space of the streets as a marked prostitute body. Taba’s insistence that her daughter become a prostitute marks the young girl’s body as the site where the public and private spaces disintegrate, stripping Tanga of an ontological self. But Beyala mediates for her heroine a site through which she negotiates between her psychic interior and cultural exterior. Tanga instead decides to mother 12-year-old Mala, an act that allows her to trespass the masculine mode of disciplining a body, ensuring that this time, it’s she who controls the erotic responses of her body. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” He’le’ne Cixous writes of the crimes of art and writing women must commit to take over the “discourse of man”. Cixous asks: “who hasn’t accused herself of being a monster?” (348). In framing this question, Cixous suggests that it’s okay to transform one’s body.

As the writers interrupt the hegemonic definitions of the women’s lives, they suggest that the act of transgressing the patriarchal law can be both a place for “radical openness and possibility” as hooks proposes (*Yearning* 149) and at the same time a place for pain and alienation. The narratives show that accounts of how women in African societies alter the dynamics of power involves sustained efforts in crafting possibilities of redemption in spaces created in and disseminated by social practice. But irrespective of the kind of resistance the four writers embrace, their overriding mission is to articulate

the collective erasure of women fostered by their restrictive social-cultural mores.

Through the various subversive strategies, the writers encourage their readers to re-examine both the patriarchal and postcolonial gendered ideologies. Their novels affirm a continuous challenge and resistance to the hegemonic power discourse in postcolonial Africa, particularly when they display liberating tools like “safe spaces” that empower women to speak and listen to each other. In that sense, the four writers I consider in my dissertation are seen forging new paths as they recollect a distorted women’s past and commit to articulating and sharing a liberating women’s future.

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