



**University of Fort Hare**  
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**GENDER OPPRESSION AND POSSIBILITIES OF EMPOWERMENT: IMAGES OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO MARIAMA BÂ'S *SO LONG A LETTER*, BUCHI EMECHETA'S *THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD* AND TSITSI DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS*.**

**By**

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## **DECLARATION**

**I, Mazvita Mollin Nyanhongo, do hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is entirely mine with the exception of such quotations or references which have been attributed to their authors or sources.**

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**M.M. Nyanhongo**

## **DEDICATION**

To my wonderful daughter, Haidee Nomufaro Thondhlana- you need to be wary of all the subtle forms of oppression, so that you attain that which is fulfilling to you.

To my other daughters -Karen Tapfira, Casey Tapfira, Tafadzwa Sachikonye, Lisa Nyanhongo, Thelma, Nokutenda and Tapiwa Nyanhongo.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study consists of a comparative analysis of three novels by three prominent African women writers which cast light on the ways in which women are oppressed by traditional and cultural norms in three different African countries. These three primary texts also explore the ways in which African women's lives are affected by other issues, such as colonialism and economic factors, and this study discusses this. An analysis of these novels reveals that the interconnectedness of racial, class and gender issues exacerbates the oppression of many African women, thereby lessening the opportunities for them to attain self-realization.

This study goes on to investigate whether there are possibilities of empowerment for the women in the primary texts, and examining the reasons why some women fail to transcend their situations of oppression. The primary novels will be discussed in different chapters, which explore the problems with which various women are beset, and discuss the extent to which the various women in the novels manage to attain empowerment.

In conclusion, this study compares and contrasts the ways in which the women in the primary texts are oppressed and highlights the reasons why some women are able to attain empowerment, whilst others are unable to do so. It also shows that many women are beset with comparable forms of oppression, but they may choose to react to these situations differently. Over and above these issues, the study seeks to draw attention to the fact that women need to come together and contribute to the ways in which they can attain various forms of empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden,' she said. 'How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy. And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength" (Dangarembga, 1988: 16).

The above quotation from Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, depicts some of the ways in which traditional assumptions regarding of the role of women in Zimbabwean societies can serve to confine and oppress women, limiting their options in life. Moreover, as is evident in the above-cited extract, a great many African women suffer the triple burden of race, class and gender oppression. These forms of subjugation can relate to one another in different ways. For instance, some women may be oppressed on the grounds of their gender and race; and others as a result of their gender and class. Meanwhile, for some women such as Mainini, the speaker in this passage, gender, racial and class oppression go hand-in-hand. As her words suggest, these forms of suffering are significantly generated and sustained by oppressive aspects of traditional norms and practices. Consequently, many African women have to 'learn to carry [their] burdens with strength' in order not to succumb to the pressures of African societies.

As the passage suggests, a considerable number of women in this continent tend to have no say in their day-to-day activities and do not make decisions at all. The girl child is the most disadvantaged of all, because she is compelled to make 'sacrifices', which the boy child is not. Mainini's words 'you have to start learning them early' illustrate this.

One of the main objectives of this study is to investigate the oppressive aspects of African tradition, as well as various interconnected forms of race, class and gender oppression which hinder women from developing a full sense of selfhood. In order to carry this out, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of three primary texts by three prominent African women writers: *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ (1979), *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta (2006) and *Nervous Conditions* by Dangarembga. However, this study also explores the extent to which there are possibilities for self-realization and personal

empowerment for women who are oppressed in these ways. Furthermore, this study also examines the ways in which the primary texts offer us insights into not only the oppressive aspects of tradition, but also its constructive aspects and the ways in which it can assist women's self-actualization and empowerment. This study also includes an enquiry into how these oppressive traditional norms and practices arise, how they are sustained, how they manifest themselves and the effect they have on African women's lives.

Commenting on women's suffering as a result of these factors, and also on hope for women, both in Africa and elsewhere in the world, Mariama Bâ states in an interview in 1980: 'There is a cry everywhere, everywhere in the world a woman's cry is being uttered. The cry may be different but there is still a certain unity' (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi 1997: 8 – 9). Some of these cries, or forms of suffering caused by oppression, of which Bâ speaks arise in part from the above-mentioned forms of subjugation and disempowerment experienced by the women in the primary texts. These may then be echoed in cries from other women in various parts of the African continent.

The issue of women's oppression and empowerment has been one major theme in African literature and research in the last few decades. There is no doubt that this has been a late but necessary response to the realization that women have been exploited, overlooked and belittled for a long period of time. Women suffer in this way as a result of various factors, some of which may be related to traditional beliefs and practices in their societies. This is often interconnected with forms of racial and economic oppression. This is evident not only in African societies, but also in African literature which reflects these features of these societies. However, men still tend to dominate the African literary sphere, leading Omolara Ogunjide-Leslie to ask the following question: 'Are African women voiceless or do we fail to look for voices where we may find them, in the sites and forms which these voices are uttered?' (2001: 139)

Yet the diversity of women's situations in Africa is extensive and many African women do not regard themselves as feminists, for reasons that will be examined in the course of this study. Moreover, it will become evident that many African women do not want to do away with tradition, but only the oppressive aspects thereof. As a result of the complexity of this situation, there is still a need 'to look for [women's] voices' and consider what they have to



say about the effect of tradition on women's lives, along with other forms of oppression with which they are beset, and also explore the possibilities of empowerment available to them. This study will be guided by womanist theory and also second-wave African-American and African feminist theories.

In the course of this investigation, the study seeks to answer several related questions. Firstly, in what way do the three primary writers delve into the larger social, political and economic factors that entrap women? Next, can women ever be independent of men or it is an idealist conception of radical feminists? Moreover, to what extent do the oppressive practices described in the novels still affect the lives of African women today? In addition, how do the images of self-realization and empowerment in the novels differ from or resemble those contained in works of other male and female writers in Africa? In the light of these concerns, this study evaluates Mariama Bâ's, Buchi Emecheta's and Tsitsi Dangarembga's contribution to African women's literature and the discourse of gender equity. These three novels have been selected as the primary focus of this study because they are well-known novels written by prominent African women writers. Indeed, *So Long a Letter* and *Nervous Conditions* are Bâ's and Dangarembga's best-known novels; and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* has been widely read and much discussed. Such novels allow us to hear various African women's voices, and are a window to women's experiences. They also show the diversity of women's experiences in different societies in West and Southern Africa. In these and other respects, these three texts also cast light on each other, illuminating certain areas of commonality as well as significant differences.

The emergence of renowned female writers such as Emecheta, Bâ and Dangarembga, coupled with the liberation of African countries from colonial power, has opened space for women to counterbalance and correct stereotyped female images in African literature and post-colonial societies. For instance, a novel such as Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* seeks to present a picture of motherhood in Africa that differs markedly from the idealized presentations of motherhood by certain male writers on this continent such as Leopold Senghor. For instance, the poetry of Senghor, which depicts women as Mother Africa figures, perpetuates and reaffirms the subordinate roles of women; while the identities of many of the women in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's novels tend to be bound up with their roles as wives and mothers. On the other hand, writers such as Bâ, Emecheta and Dangarembga depict the position of women

in Africa as they battle with or succumb to the various forms of traditional oppression that hinder them from attaining personal empowerment, while many well-known male African writers, such as Ngugi and Senghor, do not explore these damaging aspects of tradition. Furthermore, these three women writers explore women's attempts to achieve self-actualization in the changing societies they inhabit. Ketu H. Katrak states that women writers such as these play a significant role in women's literature, by exploring new possibilities for women and women's writing:

Women writers' uses of oral traditions and their revisions of Western literary forms are integrally and dialectically related to the kinds of content and the themes they treat. Women writers' stance, particularly with regard to glorifying/denigrating traditions, vary as dictated by their own class backgrounds, levels of education, political awareness and commitment, and their search for alternatives to existing levels of oppression often inscribed within the most revered traditions. Their texts deal with, and often challenge, their dual-oppression-patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism and that inscribes the concepts of womanhood, motherhood, traditions such as dowry, bride-price, polygamy and a worsened predicament within a capitalist economic system introduced by the colonizers. Women writers deal with the burdens of female roles in urban environments (instituted by colonialism), the rise of prostitution in cities, women's marginalization in actual political participation (2006: 240).

In this extract, Katrak discusses various forms of oppression, a number of which are depicted in the primary texts. Moreover, she mentions women's quests for self-actualization. The three primary texts provide us with insight into ways in which some women are able to attain empowerment, as illustrated in Katrak's words 'search for alternatives', whilst others are unable to do so. However, despite concerted efforts to empower women especially in post-colonial societies and states, many women have not been emancipated from various forms of psychological, emotional, physical oppression and sex-role stereotyping. The three primary texts make us aware of this in various ways. For example, there are many women like Maiguru in *Nervous Conditions*, who runs away from her home because she is not allowed to regard herself as her husband's equal, but eventually returns to her husband, and a life of submissiveness and subservience. Her daughter Nyasha also suffers emotionally due to traditional patriarchal perceptions, in which women are not permitted to rebel against male dominance.

Next, Katrak mentions polygamy, which is still a common practice which can result in greater hardships for women, sometimes representing a potential obstacle in their paths to empowerment. For example, this is depicted in *So Long a Letter*, in which Ramatoulaye suffers because her husband takes another wife. But yet Ramatoulaye manages to attain self-actualization, unlike a woman such as Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who is denigrated by her husband's polygamy, but unable to transcend that which confines her. Polygamy can also erode the possibility of women-to-women support; and women may be deprived of their support structures in other ways. For example, they may leave their communities, friends and families in order to live far away, in an unfamiliar place, with their husbands. They may also be forced into early marriages and thus also deprived of support structures. For example in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego suffers when her sons desert her. In the three primary texts, tradition is one key factor that may inhibit some women's potential for empowerment, although on the other hand, it can sometimes contribute to their growth to self-actualization. However, although tradition is one significant form of oppression, there are a range of others, such as the extent to which gender oppression is intensified by racial and economic oppression. Along with diverse other factors, these have an impact on some women's potential for empowerment.

The study will include an investigation of oppressive traditional norms and values such as polygamy, the extent to which male children are valued, while female children are denigrated, and the valorization of motherhood and childbearing. All these can lead to gender oppression, resulting in the dehumanization and objectification of women. Through its focus on three prominent works of African women's fiction, this study will analyze various literary representations of the traditional norms and practices which have led to the marginalization of women in Africa. Without a fuller understanding of these aspects of tradition and the forms of racial and class oppression to which they are connected, it will be difficult to overcome the gender oppression that prevents many African women from attaining their full potential, and thus will be harder to attain greater gender equity. Therefore, this study aims to enhance our understanding of the various forms of oppression that many African women still face and the tension between possibilities of liberation and the pressure to submit to gender stereotypes that are embedded in African societies. This study also explores the extent to which various African women are able to attain empowerment in the face of these forms of oppression. While some women may fail tragically, others succeed triumphantly in some

respects, but not in others. The extent to which gender stereotypes have permeated African literature and society will now be examined, as will the ways in which these stereotypes are being challenged in African literature by writers such as Bâ, Emecheta and Dangarembga, among various others.

Many prominent writers and critics have drawn attention to the way in which women have been silenced, stereotyped and marginalized in African literature. As Charles Fonchingong has observed, 'African literature is replete with writings that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of African women' (2006: 134). Further to this, Mary Mogundipe Kolawole (1997) notes that 'most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalization of African women' (cited in Fonchingong: 135). Fonchingong goes on to contend that various traditional norms and practices in diverse African societies are biased against women and are gender-insensitive. A great many African women are the 'subaltern', in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, as she alludes to situations in which 'the woman might speak but might not be heard' (2006: 28). For example, such women may be represented, rather than being fully accorded voices of their own. As one manifestation of this, some traditional African proverbs maintain that women should not be listened to. For instance, one African proverb states: 'If in times of drought a woman comes and tells you she has found a well, do not listen to her'(cited in Schipper 1985: 20). Comparable tendencies are evident in literature, as Kolawole further points out that 'female characters in the work of many prominent male writers were made marginal to the plot of fiction, while only a few emerged as powerful and credible protagonists'(cited in Fonchingong: 135). For example, there are many stereotypical images of women in Ngugi's and Senghor's work, thus constraining and limiting the options available to many of their female protagonists.

Gloria Chukukere (1995) further argues that 'the ideal female characters created by male writers often work within the framework of the traditional roles as wife and mother' (cited in Fonchingong: 136). For instance, this also holds true for Ngugi's heroines in many cases and also for Achebe's earlier female characters such as Nwoye's mother and Enzima's mother. Oladele Taiwo (1984) also confirms that the absence of African female writers from the literary arena, which was due to a number of factors, has resulted in the misrepresentation of the female character by male writers. Work by most of these earlier male writers was mostly

about male heroism and dominance (1 – 2). Indeed, men dominated the socio-economic and political machinery and organizations in the societies in which such literary texts were set. W. Lloyd Brown (1979) supports this, as he notes that: '[t]he women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices, rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in the field' (3).

This state of affairs is generated and sustained by the traditional perception that men were natural leaders, born to rule over women, and that women's perspectives were regarded as being of little worth. Consequently, in Mineke Schipper's words, 'men are not used to taking the female perspective into account when it does not coincide with their own' (54). This has resulted in problematic representations of women in literature. One of the earliest and most famous African works of literature, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) by Chinua Achebe, emphasizes 'macho heroism and masculinity in an attempt to recapture the strength of the African past' as Fonchingong contends (137). In such a scenario, the depiction of female experiences and perspectives was limited, and thus, as Linda Strong-Leek (2001) argues, 'women were indoctrinated to view the world from a patriarchal perspective' (cited in Fonchingong: 138). For example, Charles Fonchingong describes how in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) Okonkwo is said to 'vent his anger on his son Nwoye, for preferring to listen to his mother's tales to his father's masculine stories of violence and bloodshed' (138).

Contemporary African female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Yvonne Vera, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Mariama Bâ and Buchi Emecheta, among many others, have sought to remedy the one-sided presentation of the African women in African literature. Yet, as Mary Eagleton observes, while literature by women provides essential insights into female experiences, the fact is it has not been easy for them to publish their works. As Ama Ata Aidoo says, 'life for the African woman writer is definitely 'not [a] crystal stair' to success (cited in Ogunyemi 1985: 69), because they are women and also because of their skin colour. Yet, in the face of these odds, African women writers strive to reverse aspects of female marginalization and seek to right the wrongs of the past. They investigate and explore ways in which women can overcome the obstacles hindering their personal empowerment. Basically, their message is that in the face of an oppressive system of deep rooted norms and practices that foster female subordination, women writers must strive to assert themselves, by depicting the extent to which their female protagonists can attain self-realization. These

writers are committed to redefining the role of African women and rectifying the gender imbalance in the literary sphere. Thus, these female writers seek to encourage other women and the society at large to view the position of woman and the possibilities available to them differently.

Work of this nature has had an impact on African literature. With the onset of African and African-American second-wave feminism and the above-outlined attempts to reconstitute the distorted image of women in African literature, some male writers such as Chinua Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Sembene Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood* (1984) and Ngugi Wa Thiongo in *The Detained* (1981), are revisiting their earlier approaches by presenting varied and substantial images of women. Ngugi writes about heroines who take part in liberation struggles, as illustrated in *Petals of Blood* (1977) and *Devil on the Cross* (1980). For his part, Ousmane depicts strong, determined women who play a critical role in a railway strike. Commenting on such works by the above-cited authors, Fonchingong aptly notes that their female protagonists 'are empowered with strength, foresight and perseverance' (145).

It is of paramount importance to examine the position that women once occupied in African societies, in order to understand how women have been made to suffer, and how this has contributed to and sustained their oppression. Various scholars of African studies argue that African women were not originally born under the yoke of patriarchy. They maintain that a complementarity between male and female roles existed in pre-colonial African societies. For instance, Filomina Steady (1987) supports this idea:

African women had definite social, political and economic roles that induced them to achieve a measure of independence...through participation in production and reproduction...women held executive positions as chiefs, paramount chiefs and monarchs (cited in Hendricks and Lewis, 1997: 68).

Christine Qunta (1987) also concurs with this line of thought. According to Hendricks and Lewis, Qunta strives to 'reclaim traditional African heroines with a view to constructing an affirmative matrilineage' (68). However, Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stitcher (1984) maintain that, the situation began changing as a result of colonization (cited in Fonchingong: 135). Women have suffered especially from this time onwards. Notwithstanding this, authors such as Qunta, Hay and Stitcher are strongly believed to be romanticizing the past. Christine

Obbo (1981) is said to have countered their claims by describing how gender oppression formed a distinctive feature of pre-colonial, colonial and neo-colonial African society (Hendricks and Lewis, 1997: 68). Nonetheless, the fact that certain women occupied a position of power in pre-colonial Africa cannot be dismissed, as it is true that women could exercise sovereignty in some parts of Africa. Moreover, the changes brought by colonialism contributed to the undermining and denigration of women.

Women suffer especially because of oppressive cultural traditions, many of which still persist in modern African societies. Ogundipe-Leslie identifies traditional structures as mountains on the back of African women (cited in Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves: 7). The oppressive aspects include, but are not limited to, patriarchy, polygamy, arranged early marriages, sacrificial marriages for the benefit of male children and general subordination of women. Even today, in contemporary African societies it is still widely believed that a woman ought to stay at home, provide for the family and bear children. Furthermore, many women also hope to find inner peace through childbearing. For example, considering one of the primary texts, *The Joys of Motherhood*, set in a twentieth-century African society, it is evident that Emecheta's female protagonist initially thinks that bearing children is the highest achievement of her life. The problem is that she is hit hard by the difficulties of raising a family almost single-handedly, and thus she begins to doubt that she can find inner peace through childbearing. A similar example occurs in *Nervous Conditions*, for Tambu's mother believes that bearing and educating a male child will benefit both her and her family, yet her dreams are shattered when her son dies. Moreover, the fact that she has no say over her children's lives turns her into a sad mother.

These oppressive aspects of tradition still exist in contemporary societies. Then, in diverse works of African literature and in various African societies everything evil often tends to be viewed as fault of the women, including witchcraft. For instance, Eleanor Watchel notes that women have been burdened with blame for societal stress. Moreover, they also suffer as a result of thwarted male ambitions (1977: 32). As the numerous accusations of witchcraft in contemporary South Africa indicate, beliefs in this practice still prevail today (Niehaus, 2001: 185). As a result of notions of this nature, it was believed that if a woman could not bear children it was because she was a witch or that she had failed in her duty as a wife. For instance, in *Nervous Conditions*, Lucia is believed to be a witch because she never falls

pregnant, although many men had been known to have slept with her. Laretta Ngcobo discusses attitudes of this kind, noting that ‘the basis of marriage in the greater parts of Africa is the woman’s ability to transfer her fertility to her husband’s group, and that a good woman was expected to deliver as many children as possible more, importantly male children’ (1991: 194). Why, then, if science or nature can prove that failure to conceive could be the fault of either of the two, man or woman, is the blame apportioned to women?

Women continue to be oppressed in other areas of domestic life. Heavy expectations continue to be placed on many African women. For example, they still may be required to carry out household chores and satisfy their men’s physical needs, and to complement this by bearing male children. Thus, a woman was traditionally expected to submit to her husband’s wishes in all these respects, and still this is often the case. Moreover, she was and sometimes is still regarded as part of her husband’s property. These perceptions are reflected in African literature. For instance, in *Nervous Conditions* Tambu’s father believes it is a waste of time to educate her, as she will become married and be expected to care for her husband. Ngcobo expands on this, stating that young girls in many African societies were prepared to be mothers at an early age because this was regarded as their principal destiny. Moreover, when she marries, a woman is called by her husband’s name and later, after she produces a male child, she is called by the child’s name. In consequence, she would not be regarded as possessing a separate, independent identity (194). This would also deprive her of a voice of her own. So tradition, exacerbated by socio-economic developments has been perverted to suit patriarchy. One illustration of this occurs in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, when Okonkwo asks his first wife when she has become one of the ‘ndichie’, [one of the elders of the society] after expressing an opinion of her own. This means that women never had much say in community matters in many traditional African societies, and in most instances they tacitly accepted or were brainwashed into accepting their inferior status. Further to this, in *Anowa* (1970) by Aidoo, Kofi Ako reminds his wife Anowa of her limits in their verbal disagreements over the possession of slaves, stating ‘[w]e all know you are a woman and I am the man’ (30). This shows that women’s voices were often silenced and were supposed to be heard only in the private domain of the home, while men operated in the foreground.

However, with the dawn of political independence in different African states, and the socio-political changes that ensued, new directions and frameworks for women’s empowerment



began to be formulated. Thus, the marginalization of women became increasingly challenged. In *God's Bits of Wood*, Sembene comments on this, observing that, 'And the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women' (1984: 34). Although this statement depicts Senegalese society during colonialism, it could also be applied to African women in various post-colonial societies. For example, now women occupy a significant number of powerful ministerial positions in South Africa and other countries on this continent. A ministry such as Foreign Affairs in South Africa is under the supervision of a woman. Another woman, Christine Lagarde, has been recently appointed to be the leader of the International Monetary Fund in June 2011. In South Africa and elsewhere in Africa, women's rights are protected by the constitution. Swaziland's new constitution, adopted in 2006, makes women the legal equals of men who are able to own property, sign contracts and obtain loans without the sponsorship of a man. In 2006, Zimbabwe allowed women to inherit property from husbands and fathers. Liberia also passed a stiff statute against rape and the president-elect, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the first woman in modern Africa to be elected a head of state, pledged to enforce it (Lafraniere, 2006). Furthermore, Sharon Lafraniere has noted that 'the banning of virginity test in South Africa is an example of the measures being taken to increase fair treatment of women on the continent'.

However, legislation such as this, which helps build gender equality, has met resistance from proponents of traditional practices, such as traditional leaders. In response to the 2006 ban on virginity testing in South Africa, Patekile Holomisa, President of the Congress of Traditional Leaders, said, 'We will uphold our traditions and customs' (cited in Lafraniere).

In South Africa and elsewhere in this continent, it is also apparent that women are still confined by gender stereotypes and experience sexual harassment. For instance, women still play marginal roles in workplaces. Moreover, despite some of the above-mentioned changes, it is still not uncommon to find an insignificant number of women occupying influential and powerful positions in our societies today. For example, Davison Makanga states that very few women occupy powerful political positions in the government of National Unity in Zimbabwe. Only four women are part of the thirty-five member cabinet, far short of the equal representation of women in decision-making that Zimbabwe pledged itself to establish in September 2003. Makanga discusses this further, observing that female politicians also

oversee departments that are not the most critical, while in contrast, male politicians head all key departments such as national security, finance and home affairs. Apart from the four female cabinet ministers, another four out of nineteen were appointed deputy ministers but without cabinet seats. Their roles are largely ceremonial, as per Zimbabwean Legislation, as they cannot be acting ministers in the absence of their superiors. This shows in unequivocal terms that the road to gender parity and women's liberation in African societies looks longer than previously envisaged (Makanga, 2009).

Emecheta asserts that, while traditional notions of appropriate work for men and women have changed, women are still expected to assume the same roles that prevent them from attaining self-fulfillment (Killam: 44). Killam discusses the way this is depicted in her work, observing that Emecheta's characters are constrained by oppressive forces of tradition and socio-economic changes. So tradition, in combination with socio-economic developments, has been perverted to suit patriarchy. Next it is clear that women have become material assets in the modern cash economy. For instance, this is shown through the naming of Nnu Ego which means 'a great amount of money'. This is indicative of the fact that parents in her society view their female children as money-generating machines. A similar example occurs in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, in the way in which young women in the novel are perceived as potential sources of profit for their families.

In the three primary texts, the main female protagonists are also expected to display the qualities of a 'good and normal woman'. In other words, they are supposed to conform to socially acceptable, patriarchally determined notions of appropriate female conduct. This often includes the performance of roles deemed complementary or non-threatening to established notions of masculinity, such as housekeeping and child-rearing. By means of Rama's letter, Bâ suggests that all women have important stories to tell and that they should tell their stories so that they can achieve self-awareness and personal empowerment through self-expression. Further to this, Bâ and other women writers can also tell these women's stories, so as to assist other African women in their struggles for liberation from various forms of oppression, and to help them to move forward in their quests for personal empowerment. Mbye B. Cham (1987) believes that Bâ accurately describes the social, religious, and gender differences that can hold women back, even as they strive to forge a

strong new individuality. Yet, through her depiction of Rama, Bâ shows us that it is possible for some women to triumph over these obstacles.

The fact that Rama relates her own story has a wider significance, suggestive of the important role that African women writers such as Bâ, Emecheta and Dangarembga can play, as they depict that which they know well: the lives of women in their own societies. Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* notes that the Orient 'is not an inert fact of nature' (2006: 25). According to him the Orient has a history and a tradition and the Orient is the best person to tell it. His points could be applied to the African context. In the other words, the West or the 'Occident' cannot tell the story of the global south. This also has bearing on African women's literature too. For a deeper, better informed understanding of the dynamics at work in African women's lives, one needs to listen to what African women have to say. Accordingly, a study such as this examines some prominent African women's novels such as *Nervous Conditions*, *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, examining the ways in which they are expressive of African women's perspectives.

In the light of this study's focus on African women's voices and experiences, African and African-American feminist perspectives and womanism provide an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. These critical perspectives are particularly suited to a study of this nature for several reasons. At the centre of feminism is the quest to recognize women's right to be free from various forms of gender oppression. Feminism has been defined in different ways, yet most feminist perspectives contain a similar underlying idea. For instance, the Nigerian-born critic, Helen Chukwuma's definition of feminism is broadly applicable to African, African-American and Anglo-American feminisms and to the three primary texts in this study: 'Feminism means.....a rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Women conditioning in Africa is the greatest barrier toward a fulfillment of the self' (1994: ix).

Such convictions pose a particular challenge to the oppressive aspects of patriarchy. However, feminism is not a uniform theoretical approach. Traditional Anglo-American feminist perspectives have been critiqued by womanism and second-wave feminist theories, formulated particularly by black women in Africa, the African diaspora, and the Caribbean,

who felt that Anglo-American feminist theory was a narrowly defined approach. They contended that feminist theory of this kind theory focused particularly on white middle-class women and their quest to be equal with men and so they critiqued the racial and class bias of traditional Anglo-American feminism (Lockett 1989: 126; Hendricks and Lewis 2004: 64; Smith 1977: 122; Ogunyemi 1985: 69; hooks 1984: 18). Thus, such theories as womanism and second-wave feminist theories were intended to expose limitations of mainstream feminism. Consequently, many African and African-American female writers and critics have refused to be called feminists, as they say that the problems of white women are not the same as those of black women and that white feminist writers, critics and activists have not taken black women's needs into account. Ifi Amadiume (1997) has this to say:

The western 'sisterhood' of the 1960's and 1970's was a false and baseless fabrication, neither a material nor historical basis. African women do not understand sisterhood individualistically, as do the European women. Female solidarity in the African context is fundamentally associated with the culture of matriarchy and the ideology of motherhood, whereas motherhood has negative connotations in western feminist concepts (cited in Cheryl Toman, 2008: 69).

Female writers such as Emecheta and Dangarembga, have rejected the term 'feminism' as a mode of defining African women's ordeals, or expressed reservations about using the term, preferring 'womanism' and 'second-wave feminism'. For instance, as the title of Emecheta's essay indicates, and as she says in an interview in 1980:

I am a feminist with a small 'f'! I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital 'F' (Feminist), women who say women should live together and all that I say No. Personally I'd like to see the ideal, happy marriage, but if it doesn't work for goodness sake, call it off (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi: 7).

Moreover, Dangarembga has also stated in an interview that 'white Western feminism does not meet my experiences at a certain point, the issues of me as a black woman. The black American female writers touch more of me than the white ones' (cited in Nfah-Abbenyi: 9). Above all, black 'feminists' find Anglo-American feminism problematic in that it does not realize that black women's oppression is located at the intersections of race, class and gender as do womanist theorists (see, for example, Ogunyemi: 67, Hendricks and Lewis: 61 and hooks: 18). As a result of the extent to which African and African feminism and womanism take interconnected issues of race, class and gender into account, these theoretical

perspectives are particularly suited to the primary texts. In their various ways, these three novels highlight the way in which gender oppression is often intertwined with class-based oppression, or with both racial and economic subjugation. Moreover, various African and African-American writers and critics describe how white Anglo-American feminist ideologies dominated feminist discourse and practices in the 1950s and 1960s to a great extent. For example, hooks discusses the limitations of Anglo-American feminism, stating: 'If we dared to criticize the movement or to assume responsibility for reshaping feminist ideas and introducing new ideas, our voices were tuned out, dismissed, silenced. We could be heard only if our statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant discourse' (12). Other African and African-American writers and critics such as Patricia Hill Collins (1991) corroborate this. With time, this hegemony was challenged by other feminist approaches, such as African and African-American feminisms and also womanism. Hendricks and Lewis describe how second-wave feminism includes theories of 'black women and the transformation of the seventies feminist tradition in which subordinate women opposed universalizing gender as a discrete unit of analysis and basis for mobilization in which earlier feminism was based'(63). This means that women are different, therefore African black women's problems could not be the same as those of white middle-class women.

Comparably, Collins observes that 'people who are oppressed usually know it', (1991: 7) because it is only black women who have complete insight into black women's experiences. Collins supports black feminist thought on account of the way in which it encourages black women to fight the stereotypes imposed on them and express their own perceptions and convictions, thereby presenting perspectives that contrast with those of traditional Anglo-American feminist theory which has 'suppressed black women's ideas' (7). Collins goes on to note that the black feminist thought has been created by black women and not western women intellectuals, using their own experiences in order to express a black woman's standpoint (10). This also calls to mind Said's above-cited point on Orientalism. In critical theory, as well as in literature, African women writers and critics should strive to speak for themselves. Dabi Nkululeko concurs with this, arguing that black women must develop new theories that capture what is real in Africa and map out their own liberation in male-dominated societies (1987: 91; 104). Accordingly, this study is significant for several reasons. It is conducted by an African woman who has insight into and, in certain respects, a deeper understanding of concerning other African women issues as an 'insider'. African

women critics are needed so that ‘outsiders’ will not speak or interpret African women’s experiences.

As a result, Ogunyemi has created the term ‘womanism’. Though she claims that she arrived at the term independently, she does not deny that her idea corresponds with that of Alice Walker (1985: 72). According to Walker, womanism refers to a woman who is committed to the survival and wholeness of all people, male or female (2005: xi). Walker endorses the idea of formulating an individual vision that is in keeping with black women’s needs and experiences, and her own particular sense of what is appropriate. Hence, she says in a New York Times Newspaper:

I don’t choose womanism because it is ‘better’ than feminism. I choose it because I prefer the sound, the feel, the fit of it because I cherish the spirit of women the word calls to mind and I share the ethnic American habit of offering the society a new word when the old word its using fails to describe behavior and change that only a new word can help it see more fully (1984: 94).

There are, however, certain differences between womanism and black feminism. Womanism tends to have a visionary focus, offering images of hope and healing. Ogunyemi describes how ‘ultimately, womanism tends towards reconciliation and acceptance, even in situations in which suffering has been inflicted by patriarchal domination’ (71). Yvette Abrahams draws attention to another key feature of womanism: the extent to which ‘it centers uncompromisingly on the construction of self’ (2001: 71). The way in which womanism focuses on developing a sense of independent selfhood forms a significant feature of two of the primary texts, *So Long a Letter* and *Nervous Conditions*. In contrast, we are made aware of the need for this and the absence of this in *The Joys of Motherhood*. Abrahams goes on to note that ‘womanism offers black woman a space to develop a sense of full individuality in a world determined by external definitions of identity which are racist and sexist’ (71).

Both womanism and African and African-American feminism differ from traditional Anglo-American feminism in a range of other ways that have bearing on the three primary texts. For instance, both approaches value family. For example, hooks notes that the family does not necessarily hold the same oppressive meanings for black women as it does for white women (37). Various other black feminist and womanist critics such as Ogunyemi (69) and Walker (2005: 238) concur with this, because they feel that the black women can draw strength and

support from their families. This is because it is only within their families that they do not experience forms of oppression such as racial segregation. Accordingly, hooks also maintains that one cannot really comment on the problems of women in a universalizing manner by referring to one group of white, middle-class women, as African women's experiences of family life are influenced by the specific nature of their context (37). As we will see, the primary texts draw attention to the importance of family bonds in various ways. This is indicative of both womanist and black feminist perspectives. However, black feminist writers and critics tend to critique certain aspects of family structures in a way that womanism does not. These two theories differ in this respect, because womanism tends to emphasize the potential for harmony and reconciliation, whereas feminism can retain a more critical stance, emphasizing the inequity of gender oppression.

A study of this kind is significant for various reasons. In many African societies, there is the realization that there is still a long way to go to address past and present male-female imbalances and inequalities, despite the fact that efforts are under way to redress this inequity in some societies, such as South Africa. However, there are still various ways in which women are oppressed in contemporary African societies and considerable knowledge gaps concerning this subject that still require filling. Moreover, the extent to which various women in certain African societies have access to forms of empowerment is also an issue that could be considered further. A study of this nature, which explores the traditional, cultural, economic and socio-political complexities within which various African women find themselves, and which can help or hinder their quests for empowerment can contribute to a greater awareness and understanding of these concerns. Accordingly, this study explores the various forms of gender oppression to which African women are subjected. Many of these are rooted in traditional norms and practices such as polygamy, forced early marriages, limited female participation in decision-making and slim educational opportunities. These are often interwoven with various colonial and postcolonial socio-economic factors, such as poverty, heightened desire for individual material accumulation, difficulties in deriving economic support from communal structures, and the pressure on individuals to establish themselves in the world. Meanwhile, African women have been, and, all too often continue to be subjected to forms of racial oppression, much of which is interwoven with many of the above-listed economic factors, thus exacerbating the forms of oppression with which many of them are afflicted. Further to this, there are a range of reasons why, despite circumstances of this

nature, some women have been able to achieve personal empowerment and self-actualisation, while others have been unable to accomplish this.

If individual perceptions of these above-delineated concerns are enhanced and expanded through a comparative analysis of literary texts that depict these issues, such as the primary texts in this study, this could have the potential to contribute to the ongoing discussions and debates concerning these matters in southern African literary-critical circles. In the end, literary-critical explorations of these issues might play a role in facilitating and paving the way for changes on a broader socio-political level.

In conclusion then, there is a need for studies such as these, so as to help develop a fuller academic understanding of the issues affecting women in African societies. To begin analyzing these issues, Bà's *So Long a Letter* will be discussed, showing the ways in which women in Senegalese Islamic society are oppressed yet, notwithstanding this, how some of them manage to empower themselves.



## CHAPTER ONE

This chapter discusses women's oppression and the possibilities of women's empowerment in *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ. It will bring to light the various ways in which women are oppressed, the social norms and practices that contribute to women's oppression and the individuals who enforce this. Bâ depicts Muslim women living within a patriarchal culture, the religious tenets and social conventions of which serve to keep women subject to male authority. She depicts the different levels of oppression at work in this society, while emphasizing the ways in which men are the most privileged members of this society. Moreover, this chapter will examine the ways in which women struggle to achieve self-actualization, and the extent to which this entails the capacity for self-expression. It is also worth noting that the novel's protagonists are members of the post-colonial elite, cushioned from the suffering endured by the majority.

Before examining the book, it is worthwhile taking note of certain factors that make Bâ a significant writer. She is a West African woman speaking for herself and other African women who are oppressed. Spivak maintains that 'the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in the shadow' (32). However, in contrast to this, Bâ creates a public literary space in which the voices of those women who might have been regarded as subalterns can be heard. As a result, Bâ offers an alternative vision of women, challenging those depicted by various male African writers such as Ngugi and Senghor, who endorse stereotypical notions of womanhood in their works, as mentioned in the Introduction.

Bâ steps in, as an African woman writer who writes about the issues that affect women in a particular society, the Senegalese Islamic society, which she understands in depth, as an insider. Western women writers would not be able to write about Senegalese African women's problems with comparable insight. Isabel Yrigoyei, an African-American critic, draws attention to the value of literary approaches of this nature. She contends that women should speak about that which they understand better than outsiders: their own experiences, and not let others speak on their behalf, saying: 'We are not equally oppressed. There is no joy in this. We must speak from within us, our own experiences, our own oppressions- taking someone else's oppression is nothing to feel proud of. We should never speak for that which we have not felt' (cited in hooks, 1984: 57).

This is borne out in *So Long a Letter*, for Bâ has a clear understanding of how women are oppressed in her society. Moreover, her aim is to show that certain African traditions in Senegalese society have some harmful effects that need to be addressed, as do aspects of Islamic tradition in her country. Yet Bâ asserts that not all the African traditional practices are oppressive, but critiques those that can be harmful, such as polygamy, which deprives women of the attention that they should receive from their husbands. In Ramatoulaye's case, who shall henceforth be called Rama, it is worse because when her husband wishes to take another wife he never discusses this with her. Thus, through her description of the lives of her main character, Rama and her friend Aissatou, Bâ maintains that there is a need to revisit some of the customary practices in African tradition. Rama is a woman who expresses herself freely in her letter to a friend in a society in which women are not permitted to speak out. Yet, despite constraints of this kind throughout the book, we hear an African woman's voice describing her predicament. Rama describes her polygamous marriage and the forms of oppression that she experiences, as well as several ways in which she attains empowerment within the spaces available to her in her society. This confirms that, under certain circumstances, it is possible for women to deal with various forms of oppression with which they are beset, without renouncing their tradition and culture entirely.

Boyce Davies makes a point that also has bearing on this issue and the context within which the novel is set and which also reinforces the importance of the women writers such as Bâ. Davies has this to say: 'The social and historical realities of African women's lives must be considered in any meaningful examination of women in African literature and of writing by African women writers' (2007: 561). Bearing in mind Boyce Davies's observation, *So Long a Letter* deals with women in a specific Senegalese cultural context in which polygamy is sanctioned by both African tradition and the Islamic religion. Thus, the particular cultural and socio-economic context within which the novel is set will be taken into account as the novel is analyzed. Bâ's work also shows that even though some critics like Qunta argue that the real cause of women's oppression in Africa is the legacy of colonialism and slavery, and they should not be viewed as passive victims of African men and of traditional customs, the very issues that she rules out contribute significantly to women's oppression in the society described by Bâ (1987: 11). Although Qunta maintains that the effects of colonialism are worse than patriarchy, women in *So Long a Letter* are silenced by traditional customs and are

indeed victims of men who subscribe to these. However, the major characters in Bâ's novel have participated in the anti-colonial struggle and are privileged on account of this. It is within that privileged position that men still act out a traditional model of patriarchy. Nonetheless, colonialism plays a significant part in the oppression of women in the other primary texts, as will be shown in later chapters.

As indicated in the Introduction, African women have tended to be 'silent' in much of the earlier literary work from diverse African countries. Many things account for this silence, including the gender socialization process and patriarchal norms and practices. Filomina Steady comments on one feature of this, remarking that 'the African woman is different [from the western woman] as she has many disadvantages, for instance, lack of choice in motherhood and marriage' (cited in Boyce Davies and Adams Graves: 7). For instance, African women in deeply patriarchal societies such as Senegalese Islamic society are not given the opportunity to choose the men they would want to make their life partners. The choices that are made for such women are usually in the interests of men, meaning that the male authority figures in their lives choose the man they deem fit to suit their needs, which are often influenced by material concerns and issues such as status. In the process, they forget that marital decisions should not be shaped merely by such concerns. There is love itself, which should be reciprocated. Therefore, women should not be bound by patriarchal expectations concerning important aspects of their lives, such as marriage and motherhood; and more broadly, they should not be confined by other forms of patriarchal authority and control. *So Long a Letter* provides us with various examples of the ways in which its central protagonists are able to achieve liberation of this kind, since Rama serves as an example of a woman who breaks free from patriarchal oppression, as does also Aissatou, who is able to make a living for herself and her children without the help of a man.

*So Long a Letter* will be examined, so that the specific forms of oppression experienced by women in the book and the various ways in which they attain empowerment in the face of this oppression can be brought to light. A key concern of this chapter will be polygamy, which is the principal cause of the troubles experienced by the women in the novel. This practice results in the commodification of women, and encourages forms of women-to-women oppression. Thereafter, the possibilities of empowerment for women in such situations will be examined.

*So Long a Letter* describes the ordeals of the main protagonist, Rama, a school teacher in a Senegalese Muslim society who has been married for thirty years. Through Rama, Bâ discusses the issues that affect women in an Islamic society that upholds polygamy. We are made aware that the religious practices in the society in *So Long a Letter* also have oppressive aspects, in that only men are allowed to have as many partners as they want. However, polygamy is also a longstanding African cultural belief that has been in existence long before Islam. This further highlights the weakness of Qunta's above-mentioned argument that colonialism and slavery were principal causes of African women's oppression. Therefore, the book interrogates various Islamic and traditional African beliefs and practices that affect women's lives. Although Rama draws a sense of stability from some of them, a number of them affect her negatively. For instance, a widowed woman is expected to give up her possessions, when in fact she is the one who needs material support. This is what happens to Rama and this becomes a problem for her, because it leaves her on her own with limited resources to fall back on.

Thus, the book describes how women are oppressed by certain aspects of African tradition, and how this oppression is aggravated by certain Islamic beliefs and practices. Traditionally, women in this society were supposed to be submissive to their husbands and the introduction of Islam, emphasizing the importance of female submissiveness and docility aggravated their situation. Killam notes this, while drawing attention to the fact that Rama does not renounce her culture and traditions despite these factors: 'Rama manages to create a world of her own in the midst of a community in which customary religions and cultural values are intertwined with Islamic prescriptions and Christian teachings with respect to marriage and sexual relations' (56).

As Bâ discusses the issues that affect women in Senegalese Islamic society, she shows that Rama discards those aspects that do not suit or which further perpetuate her oppression, yet finds meaning in those which help her attain stability and self-actualization. Therefore, she remains married to Modou and still regards him as her husband. Further to this, as Jolanda Cornish observes, although Rama is oppressed by aspects of her tradition, she manages to create a stable environment in which she can maintain a dignified daily existence, while observing traditional customs (2009: 2). Although she resents the way Modou has treated her,

she attends his funeral and has the traditional ceremony conducted at her house. In this way, Bâ is condemning the harmful effects of tradition, while investigating the extent to which there are possibilities of empowerment for African women within traditional structures.

Bâ outlines the difficulties experienced by a woman who lives a modern life, as an educated person, employed outside the home, yet is caught in a society that practices traditional customs, many of which further male domination. Florence Stratton points out that Bâ deals with issues pertaining to women's oppression many of which emanate from traditional norms and customs, such as polygamy and its effects on women, and forced marriages (1994: 138). Yet, many male African writers who write about African women's lives have ignored these concerns.

On the other hand, Bâ looks more closely at these issues and she not only writes about polygamy as a cultural practice, but shows how it demeans womankind. This makes Bâ's work a deeper exploration of Senegalese women's experiences. *So Long a Letter* is a novel depicting the events that transpire in Rama's life from the point at which her husband, Modou, decides to marry another wife and abandon the family, describing that which takes place thereafter. Consequently, there are the times when she has to display courage in face of great odds. Rama is a woman who is able to cope with difficult situations in her life and still maintain her dignity, despite the suffering she experiences. In the process, she develops other forms of inner strength. This is confirmed by various critics, such as Taiwo (17) and Killam (56).

This enables Rama to stand firm amidst some difficult times, even though she experiences loneliness and grief, which she records in the letter which she writes to her best friend, Aissatou. Rama describes how she values love as a binding force upon which marriage is built, hence her choice in marrying Modou Fall rather than Daouda Dieng, who had also asked for her hand in marriage. Therefore, she experiences much pain when it becomes clear that her husband views marriage differently. Rama describes how Modou betrayed her and married a young second wife, Binetou, who was a friend of her eldest daughter, Daba. She narrates how she is taken by surprise as the whole event came to light. She also relates how Mawdo Bâ, Aissatou's husband also marries a second wife, young Nabou. In this case both men marry younger wives as a result of their self-centeredness and their lustful behaviour,

which is permitted by the patriarchal systems of religious and traditional authority in their society. Rama and Aissatou respond to their situations differently, for Rama stays in her marriage, whilst Aissatou divorces her husband.

*So Long a Letter* has more of a womanist than a feminist focus, so this theoretical perspective has significant bearing on the novel. In various respects, *So Long a Letter* reflects womanist perspectives, in that it not only affirms the importance of African tradition, but also because both Aissatou and Rama choose ways of life that enable them to realize their full potential and also equipping them with a sense of stability and security although feminist theoretical perspectives do endorse women's self-actualization and empowerment, the fact that both women choose to build their lives in a way that is liberating and hopeful to them is especially in keeping with the womanist focus on self-realization. Abrahams observes that womanism 'centers uncompromisingly on the construction of self' (71). *So Long a Letter* also calls womanist perspectives to mind in that it is characterized by visionary aspects in this respect, in terms of the way in which it deals with transformation on an emotional and psychological level. Moreover, the fact that Rama is able to search within herself and forgive Modou reflects another key concern of womanism. While it questions the oppressive aspects of patriarchy, it also offers ways in which women can live harmoniously with men. For instance in Walker's *The Color Purple*, the writer shows us that she is aware of the harmful effects of gender oppression, yet she does not reject men completely. According to Ogunyemi's definition of womanism, it is

black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand (66).

Although most of the men in the novel do not change from their sexist attitudes, it is clear that Bâ advocates for 'meaningful union between men and women'. Moreover, Walker's definition that a womanist is a 'black feminist or feminist of colour and is usually outrageous, audacious, courageous or of willful behaviour' (2005: xi) is illustrated through the behaviour of Rama and Aissatou in the novel. Rama displays courage and fortitude after her husband's death, embarking on an independent life of her own. Aissatou is not afraid to implement her decision to divorce Mawdo, whilst Rama rises above her circumstances, despite her sense of

betrayal and humiliation that might have undermined her as a lesser woman. For example, for Rama to move on in life, she has to forgive and ensure that there is no bitterness within her for Modou. Thus, the novel suggests there is possibility for balanced healthy relationships between male and females, where it is possible for them to exist, and also that these healthy relationships can be attained without needing to strive for equality with men. Ogunyemi posits that ‘the black woman instinctively recoils from mere equality because she has to aim much higher than that and knit the world’s black family together to achieve black, not just female, transcendence’ (69). This is evident in Rama’s relationship with her husband, which was a happy one for thirty years, and took place within the constraints of a male-dominated society, until the time Modou becomes unfaithful. *So Long a Letter* has other womanist features, for Bâ also ensures that she highlights the value of family, as a structure upon which a woman can build stability and security. This is a womanist principle in itself, whilst on the other hand, various Anglo-American feminist critics tend to view family structures as a form of oppression (Germaine Greer: 1970; Betty Friedan: 1963; Marilyn French: 1977). Various African and African-American feminists critics and writers also draw attention to the significance of family bonds. For instance, bell hooks maintains that

[f]eminists activists need to affirm the importance of family as a kinship structure that can sustain and nourish people; to graphically address links between sexist oppression and family disintegration; and to give examples, both actual and visionary, of the way family life is and can be when unjust authoritarian rule is replaced with an ethic of communalism, shared responsibility and mutuality (38).

Rama is sustained by her family and thus she is less concerned about Modou, who can be viewed as an example of ‘unjust authoritarian rule’. For example, in terms of the ‘ethic of communalism’ to which hooks alludes, there is much understanding between Rama and her children. They even take over household chores, ensuring that Rama is not overburdened, which shows a great deal of sensitivity and understanding on the children’s part (74). Moreover, family structures are valuable to Rama, for they offer her a sense of belonging. Consequently, various womanist and African and African-American feminist writers and critics describe how the family can be a reliable source of strength for African women. For instance, hooks observes that ‘many black women find the family the least oppressive institution. Despite sexism in the context of family, we may experience dignity, self-worth, and a humanization that is not experienced in the outside world wherein we confront all forms of oppression’ (37).

However, as well as providing these examples of love, support and mutual concern, Bâ also confronts a number of significant forms of oppression that are inherent in family structures in *So Long a Letter*; and also in the society at large. This is in keeping with aspects of black feminist theory, and it concurs with hook's observation that 'an important stage in political consciousness' takes place when one is able to realize the need to draw attention to 'all forms of oppression' (40). Bâ highlights this issue at the same time as she offers possibilities of individual empowerment.

Therefore, having briefly outlined several key features of the novel, the chapter will now discuss the different forms of oppression on which the novel focuses, such as polygamy and its consequences, the ways in which certain women oppress other women, and the extent to which women endeavour to reposition themselves and attain self-actualization and find voices of their own in this society. Firstly, polygamy, an issue that will also feature in the next chapter, will be discussed in more depth so as to draw attention to a major form of oppression in the novel.

### **Polygamy**

Polygamy is a practice that has existed in many African cultures for different reasons. Even with the encroachment of Western culture and the great strides towards gender equality, Catherine Addison and Vuyiswa Ndabayakhe, two South African literary critics, maintain that polygamy survives as a fiercely protected symbol of African identity (2008). Farah Udegbonam, a Muslim woman herself, observes that polygamy is common in many African cultures and moreover as it is a law in Islamic religion, in which a man is allowed to marry as many as up to four wives (2004). Women in this society suffer as a result of this specific form of patriarchy, in which Islam is combined with African tradition. Amongst the reasons that permit this in African tradition are illness and barrenness of the first wife. Moreover, in some African cultures, for example the Xhosa and Zulu peoples, polygamy is practised as a sign of wealth, or serves as a way of producing more labour to help in the fields. However, in contrast to this, Bâ's novel emphasizes the harmful effects of polygamy, depicting the extent to which it can undermine happiness and harmony within a relationship.



However, in certain respects, this practice can have some constructive effects. For example, amongst certain pre-colonial groupings in some parts of Nigeria, it was sometimes conducted harmoniously, as depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, this is evident when Ojiugo, Okonkwo's youngest wife, goes to plait her hair and does not return in time to prepare his lunch and the first wife minimizes her mistakes by feeding her children, though she had not asked her to do so (21). By doing so she tries to cover for her co-wife's thoughtlessness. More broadly, some African writers and critics have argued that polygamy had the potential to be harmonious in its ideal form, as Emecheta maintains in 'Feminism with a small 'f!' In this article, she argues that polygamy can allow a woman to pursue other avenues in life without worrying about her husband, because there are other women to care for the home whilst she is away. Furthermore, if the first wife is pregnant, her husband is allowed to marry another wife, who can help with household chores as well as satisfying the man's sexual needs. Emecheta also argues that a woman in a polygamous situation is able to attend meetings, especially if she is educated as polygamy allows her more freedom to develop aspects of her life outside her marriage (2007: 553, 555).

In contrast to Emecheta's assertion, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (1991) shows how polygamy can hamper independent women in various respects. In the novel, Esi realizes that she cannot receive the attention that she wants from her husband and, having experienced both monogamy and polygamous marriages, she wonders to herself if she will ever find true love. Therefore, while there is the possibility for polygamy to result in harmonious and constructive family relationships, it is clear that it is not always the case in reality. Then, further to this, in *So Long a Letter*, Bâ shows that marriage in itself can be an oppressive institution, and that polygamy aggravates the position of married women, such as Rama, Aissatou, young Nabou and Binetou. For instance, Rama affirms that she had been silent for thirty years in that marriage with Modou, meaning that she had long been denied her voice long before Modou decided to take on another wife. Thus whether or not a marriage is a polygamous one, it can still oppress women. However, it becomes more difficult for women in polygamous marriages than in monogamous marriages because they have to battle with a number of other issues, such as obtaining sufficient attention from their husbands, in the face of competition from their co-wives.

Another way in which we are made aware of damaging aspects of polygamy in *So Long a Letter* stems from the fact that the local Islamic implementation of polygamy is problematic. The Imam, Tamsir and Mawdo come to Rama's house to inform her that her husband has married a second wife. Although all these messengers are influential men in the town, they show no tact in their explanation. They simply inform Rama that according to religion and tradition, Modou has taken a second wife. They regard it as something God wishes and which Rama should accept unquestioningly. They imply that the first wife has to understand that, according to Islam, she knows her husband is entitled to have a maximum of four wives, so she will just have to accept this, because it is her fate as a woman in a polygamous marriage (37). However, according to Udegbumam, it is considered insensitive in Islamic tradition for a man to casually inform his first wife that he has taken a second wife. If he has never mentioned it to his wife beforehand and instead sends somebody else to come and inform her, then it runs counter to traditional practices (2004). In *So Long a Letter*, men such as Modou and Mawdo embark on polygamous marriages primarily to satisfy their selfish sexual desires, rather than out of a wish to conform to the laws of Islam, which they merely cite to justify their betrayal of their senior wives. Modou's brother Tamsir's behaviour is another example of the way in which religious traditions as well as cultural beliefs are perverted to serve men's interests. Although as it is a widespread practice that in some African societies widows are inherited by the survivors of the family, Tamsir approaches Rama for her hand in marriage whilst she is still in mourning, showing lack of consideration for her feelings, for he and other men feel that they can do anything, no matter how selfish, to obtain what they want. It is evident that a social context of this nature encourages male self-centeredness, while women are not accorded the space to express feelings of their own.

Women continue to be oppressed in polygamous marriages today. This is evident in a study conducted by Debora Patta for a programme screened on SATV in March 2010 *Third Degree* on e-TV, after President Jacob Zuma's polygamous marriages. In the course of this documentary, some Zulu men who were asked why they still practice the degrading system of polygamy, confirmed that they felt "trapped" in a tradition that they saw their parents practicing long before they were born. However, they said that they practiced polygamy themselves because they believed that it was one of the principal ways of preserving the customs of the Zulu people (Patta, 2010). This indicates that some men also feel confined by stereotypical, patriarchal notions of masculinity. However, the irony of this is that many

women in African societies in which polygamy is practiced are much more ‘trapped’ than men and confined by the men themselves. This study therefore contends that polygamy encourages patriarchy and the degradation of women. This is borne out by parts of the Third Degree programme, in which, when asked for their opinion, women confirmed that they were not happy with the practice of polygamy, yet they could do anything to alter it, because it was men’s business. Responses of this nature confirm that the system of polygamy is inherently sexist.

As a keynote speaker at the Conference of the Association of University English Teachers of South Africa (AUETSA) at the University of Western Cape in 1996, Ogunyemi emphasized the importance of polygamy, stating that criticism of this practice was misplaced and harmful to African tradition. However, as is evident in the case of Bâ, not all African writers and critics share her views. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, an African critic, also criticizes polygamy and demystifies all the cultural reasons traditionally given to justify it. She argues that the system is exploitative, existing only for the benefit of the men who are viewed as powerful and successful the more dependants and subordinates they possess (cited in Lindorfer: 126). While Ogunyemi views polygamy as a constructive cultural practice, she does not bear in mind that polygamy inhibits a woman in so many ways, especially if she is not educated. There are many other challenges that women can face in polygamous marriages. Although some women in monogamous marriages may be similarly affected, the situation can be worse for women in polygamous marriages. For instance, several women may be dependent on one man and thus may experience greater economic hardship after his death. This may be as a result of his money and possessions not being equally divided among them. The impact of this is mostly powerfully felt by the younger wives, who are not always able to support themselves, especially if they have been forced out of school into an early marriage, whereas a fuller education might have empowered them. For instance, young Binetou finds life meaningless after the death of Modou, and because she has been deprived of an adequate education she cannot support herself. As a result of the way in which she depended on Modou, his death meant an end to the luxurious life she had so enjoyed. Meanwhile, Rama has to work hard to support herself and her children.

A number of other African authors show the emotional pain that can be caused by polygamy and describe how detrimental polygamous relationships are to the happiness of women.

Polygamous marriages do not only create tensions between the co-wives, but also within the family at large. Nasimuyu-Wasike says that polygamy is the source of enmity of women against other women in which the women remain powerless together trapped in the ‘dynamics of patriarchy that divide and rule’ (cited in Fonchingong 2007: 127). Addison and Ndabayakhe observe that even the male authors in African literature who project positive images of polygamy do not manage to demonstrate convincing sisterhood among the co-wives (94). For instance, in Sembene’s *Xala* (1975), the first two wives join forces to fight the third wife, yet animosity even exists between the two of them. Another such example is evident in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in which Nnu Ego battles with jealousy as Nnaife, her husband, acquires new wives. She cannot come to terms with sharing a husband with other women and only forges a relationship between herself and the second wife in order to have a peaceful life.

Then, in *So Long a Letter* we see how Rama and Aissatou suffer as a result of polygamy. Even on the day of her husband’s funeral, Rama does not make an effort to hide her feelings towards Binetou, saying: ‘The presence of my co-wife beside me irritates me. She has been installed in my house for the funeral, in accordance with tradition’ (3). She points out clearly that it is purely as a result of tradition that Binetou is present in her house at this point, because personally she would not have liked the idea. Also, her use of the word ‘installed’ expresses her feelings of resentment and lack of control over the situation. As a co-wife, she is bitter. The word ‘installed’ also highlights how commodified Binetou has become as if she is a possession comparable to a piece of furniture, to be disposed of as her owner sees fit. Rendered voiceless and reduced to this state, Binetou has been deprived of the opportunity to develop a sense of independent selfhood and the capacity for self-expression because she does not have anything to say for herself. Rama, on the other hand, does not shy away from expressing her relief that Binetou will leave her house. Thus she exclaims, ‘Tonight Binetou, my co-wife, will return to her SICAP villa. At last! Phew! (8). Another problem caused by polygamy is shown in Aboulela Leila’s *Lyrics Alley* (2011) in which tensions exist between the first wife, Waheeba, who adheres to traditional ways rooted in Islamic religion and the second wife, Nabilah, a young westernized, Egyptian woman. This clearly shows that tensions between some co-wives will always exist, even if they do not take physical or verbal form. Further to this, Boyce Davies maintains that when one man has to be cared for by many wives. This, in turn generates competitiveness and jealousy, which can result in fights (2007:

563). This contrasts with Emecheta's view of polygamy, expressed in her essay '[F]eminism with a small 'f!'' in which she maintains that polygamy helps to liberate a woman precisely because she shares her husband with other wives (555). Thus harmony between co-wives remains a thing of the imagination in many polygamous marriages, despite Emecheta's claims to the contrary.

Another problem caused by polygamy occurs when the husband becomes particularly fond of one wife, neglecting other wives in favour of one, resulting in emotional and psychological stress. This is the case in *So Long a Letter*, when Binetou is especially favoured on account of her youthful appeal. Moreover, polygamy can lead to further problems, some of which are depicted in AC Jordan's 'The Turban' (2004), in which Nyengebule is especially fond of his young wife, his Ntandanekezi, meaning favourite wife, and he consequently expects to receive special treatment from her in particular. The story revolves around the tragedy that arises as a result of this.

Meanwhile, Modou's particular fondness for his younger wife creates various difficulties for him. For instance, he attends nightclubs with Binetou, although he does not possess her youthful energy and does not share her enjoyment for such activities. Mawdo also suffers from emotional stress, because he cannot relate to young Nabou and he misses the love and care he received from Aissatou. Thus, in both *So Long a Letter* and 'The Turban', polygamy can sometimes even have damaging effects on the husband, although this varies in intensity and can take on different forms.

The experiences of the women in the novel show that polygamy not only undermines freedom and equity, but it also results in betrayals in relationships that had formerly been faithful. As the chapter will show, polygamy makes it easier for a man to take on another wife without having to confront the issue of divorce, thus working in favour of men. In Bâ's novel, Rama suffers when, after thirty years of marriage, Modou abandons her for Binetou who is, humiliatingly, a woman young enough to be his daughter. The way in which polygamy is manipulated by men to further their own selfish ends and the effect that it has on other women such as Aissatou will now be examined. Like Rama, Aissatou is affected by the way in which her husband makes use of polygamy for reasons that are not related to an observance of traditional religious practices. Mawdo Bâ, her husband, marries a second wife,

supposedly to fulfill his mother's wishes. He could have told her that he would not marry Binetou, but he marries her because he could not resist her physical appearance, attempting to conceal his weakness by stating that he could not disobey his mother's wishes. For her part, Aissatou refuses to stay in this polygamous marriage and she divorces him. As has been shown in the course of this section, polygamy has a way of stripping women of their self-respect and their sense of self-worth if their husbands feel free to take on other wives simply to gratify their selfish desires, without showing any consideration for their first wife's feelings. Aissatou leaves her husband for this reason.

It is worth noting that, as Bâ reminds us various options are available to women. Aissatou and Rama face the same dilemma, but they choose to move on with their lives in different ways. Rama encounters the same ordeal of being confronted with a co-wife five years after Aissatou, and likewise she is caught unawares by the situation. Unlike Aissatou, she decides to stay in the marriage because she values her family. Thus, Rama rejects other marriage proposals, also not wishing to jeopardize the happiness of another woman. On the other hand, Modou takes delight in the strength of polygamy, convinced that this practice is sanctioned by culture and tradition and does not have any problematic aspects. In the process, he inflicts forms of psychological abuse on Rama. For instance, she loved and committed herself to Modou but he marries another wife, completely forgetting about the life he had shared with her. The callousness with which Modou replaces Rama causes her much pain, and bitterly she recalls how she had totally devoted herself to Modou, lamenting:

And to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think that twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal (12).

Rama thus expresses her deep sense of hurt, describing how 'passionately' she loved Modou, emphasizing the shock and outrage of having 'given' him thirty years of her precious life in exchange for betrayal such as this. Her sense of moral outrage is evident in her use of the word 'dared'. By using the phrase 'burning his past' Rama depicts the enormity of Modou's transgression. Thirty years and twelve children are investments that should have guaranteed lasting love in Rama and Modou's marriage.

The manner in which Modou takes another wife also adds insult to injury. Not only does Modou marry another wife without telling Rama first, but he totally disregards all their years of marriage, abandoning her and moving out to start a new life with Binetou. Even worse, the new house to which Modou moves is purchased as a result of Rama's labour. In *So Long a Letter*, we are shown through situations such as these how polygamy exploits women, robbing them of that which belongs to them and of the things for which they have worked. This applies to Rama, because Modou takes the money from the savings that they had both earned to please his younger wife and her family. Rama is not only exploited financially but also emotionally, because she can feel the void left by Modou in her life, and misses the friend with whom she shared so much of her life. She is also deprived of the dignity that she so deserves.

This is indicative of Modou's selfishness and ingratitude, which is encouraged by the patriarchal nature of his society which supports practices like polygamy, despite the fact that it can inflict suffering on women, such as Rama. To some extent, this shows that women in a society of this nature tend to be of little importance in men's lives and are not usually asked for their opinions concerning the decisions that they make. Rama expresses her bitterness when she writes, 'His abandonment of his first family (myself and my children) was the outcome of the choice of a new life. He rejected us. He mapped out his future without taking our existence into account' (9). As her words show, abandonment as a result of polygamy inflicts emotional suffering on women, partly because it makes them feel they are not regarded as separate independent individuals with feelings, needs and desires of their own.

This indicates that polygamy remains widespread in its less than ideal form, because it encourages men to put short-term physical desires before long-term commitment. Mbye Cham alludes to this, contending that the principle cause of female suffering in the novel lies in the specific failure on the part of the male characters to sustain commitment, rather than in the institution of polygamy itself (1987: 93). For instance, as we see in *So Long a Letter*, men cannot sustain commitment. After a marriage of thirty years to Rama, Modou is unfaithful and looks for a younger wife. Comparably, Mawdo fails to stay committed to Aissatou, in part because he refuses to disappoint his mother, but particularly because he, like Modou, wants a younger woman out of sheer physical desire. Thus, Cham's assertion is questionable, for he considers problems that lie beyond the institution of polygamy as the root causes of the

female protagonists' suffering. The novel highlights the ways in which polygamy causes considerable suffering to women.

As a result, men can afford to be careless and selfish in their choice of partners, allowing themselves to be guided by physical desires and their eagerness to enhance their social status, simply because they can marry more than one wife. This does encourage men to take on younger wives, partly because they are physically appealing and also because they are easy prey for them, sometimes because they have no say in the matter. These marriages also take place because men in positions of economic power are able to take advantage of young girls from economically deprived backgrounds, particularly because, as Ngwa Catherine Mankaasi points out, in most developing countries men tend to be the most economically successful (2008: 57). This also results in early pregnancies. For instance, young Nabou, who is married off at early age is expected to start producing children directly thereafter. As a result of Aunty Nabou's oppressive and self-seeking nature, Nabou is robbed of her bright future. Mawdo justifies his betrayal of Aissatou and his own lustful nature when he says: 'Driven to the limits of my resistance, I satisfy myself with what is within reach. It's a terrible thing to say. Truth is ugly when one analyses it' (34). Mawdo acknowledges the morally abhorrent nature of his actions, yet pretends to have been overpowered by his desires, which he could control, had he so wished. This form of deception has been used as an excuse for infidelity by men worldwide in both polygamous and monogamous marriages. Thus, Mawdo tries to explain to Rama that there is nothing he can do about the fact he is living with Nabou because he is drawn to her by desires beyond his control and also because she seems so easily available. Rama refuses to accept this, remarking: 'Thus, to justify himself, he reduced young Nabou to a "plate of food". Thus, for the sake of "variety", men are unfaithful to their wives' (34). This shows that Mawdo's attraction to young Nabou is superficial and it is only a means of satisfying his immediate appetites, just as one does with a 'plate of food'.

Men engage in polygamous marriages mainly because the men in this society want to live up to societal patriarchal expectations and because it is perceived as manly to marry more than one wife. This is evident when Rama describes Daouda Dieng's situation, saying: 'His wife and cousin, whom he married five years after my marriage out of his duty as a citizen and not out of love (another male expression to explain a natural action) has borne his children' (67). As her words indicate, men justify their betrayal and lack of commitment by claiming that it



is a man's duty to marry as many wives to prove that they are complying with social and religious norms, though it is indeed an excuse for their selfish behaviour. All in all, polygamy acts as a vehicle that oppresses women, while satisfying men's needs and desires.

As a result of the state of affairs, most women in this society are regarded as second-class citizens in the eyes of their male counterparts. Not only does polygamy deprive a woman of her right to own property, but it also deprives her of her sense of individual selfhood, as she is expected to submit completely to her husband and his relatives and is never regarded as a separate person in her own right. Even if she is married to a man and even after the man is dead, his wives are still identified by his name, as 'worthy widows of a worthy man' (7). All in all, it becomes apparent that long-lasting marriages based on true love are easily destroyed and lose their value, and that in the society in *So Long a Letter*, polygamy is the cause of this. For instance, Modou completely forgets about his role as a protector of his family after his marriage to Binetou. He uses the aspect of his religion which favours polygamy to his advantage, but forgets that, according to Islamic law, women in polygamous marriages are supposed to be treated as one another's equals (Udegbanum, 2004).

However, in spite of being abandoned in this way, Rama manages to support her family without Modou's help. Thus, she remains married to Modou in theory only. She endures some embarrassing and painful moments as she learns to be independent. For instance, she says: 'The last date for payment of electricity bills and of water rates demanded my attention. I was often the only woman in the queue' (51). This also indicates that such duties were usually carried out by men in this society and Modou is not available to help Rama with this. This is a very hard time for Rama, but she acquires self-reliance and determination as a result of her ability to deal resolutely with the difficulties she confronts.

Fonchingong provides further evidence that traditional African marriage acts as a conduit for injustice against women by observing that polygamy acts as a male preserve to control women's sexuality (140). Sexuality is a form of self-expression, therefore if a woman is denied this, it means that her self-actualization has been hindered (50). Thus, a young woman like Binetou is not only denied the possibility of sexual pleasure, but she is a lively young woman and does not find an older man like Modou sexually appealing. For instance, she marries him and bears his children, but this does not make her happy. Her happiness is lost

when she becomes a victim of her mother's greed for material things, submitting to an early marriage to a prosperous man and relinquishing all her possibilities for personal growth and self-actualization. The South African critic, Nise Malange, also adds that, according to some traditional perceptions, once a woman is married in South African society, she may still be expected to account for each and every step she takes out of the home (cited in Lockett:157). This can also be related to Binetou's situation, for she cannot fully experience the joy of her youth, neither can she delight in youthful freedoms because Modou is always by her side, confining and controlling her.

Various Muslim men in *So Long a Letter* not only see polygamy as a convenient means of displaying devotion to their religion, but make use of polygamy to further their interests in other respects. As has already been noted, having a number of wives can also serve as a status symbol, showing how wealthy and strong a man is. This is not restricted to men in Islamic society, but is widespread in a range of other African societies. For instance, in the South African e-TV Third Degree programme, the President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, states that polygamy is a Zulu cultural practice, indicative of a man's wealth (Patta, 2010).

Various patriarchal norms and axioms endorse polygamy and justify men's lack of commitment in their relationships. For instance, men in Senegalese society cite proverbs that justify their lustful actions, enabling them to demonstrate that both religion and society are there to uphold polygamous beliefs, allowing men to have several sexual partners within the institution of marriage. For instance, Mawdo says: 'A wife must understand, once and for all, and must forgive; she must not worry herself about "betrayals of the flesh' (34). This serves as yet another example of the way cultural beliefs are perverted to suit men's interests, while women's needs are disregarded on account of their gender. This chapter has described how men sin, destroy the things that they built together with their wives and also deprive their wives of that which belongs to them in order to please their new wives. In the society in *So Long a Letter*, the institution of polygamy serves to support this.

The next form of oppression that will be discussed is the commodification of women, which can be related to the way in which polygamy disempowers and objectifies women and, more broadly, to the male-dominated nature of this society, in terms of which women tend to be viewed as little more than items to be acquired and, if so desired, disposed of.

## **Commodification of women**

According to wikipedia, commodification means the transformation of goods or services (or things that may not normally be regarded as goods or services) into a commodity, or assigning economic value to something that traditionally would not be viewed in economic terms. This applies to the women in *So Long a Letter*. Lindorfer notes that children were the glory of a man and his property, and moreover a woman was seen as a valuable commodity owned by her male family members and later by her husband and his family (126). Even though Lindorfer is not alluding to Senegalese Islamic society but to various other African societies, her points are nonetheless applicable here. In general, daughters in African societies were required to make their parents' lives easier. Moreover, in some African societies, for instance as in *So Long a Letter*, women are viewed as income-generating mechanisms, even at a young age. Thus, whilst a girl is still in her father's home, she is viewed as an investment and when she marries she becomes an asset to her husband and his family.

As a result of the emphasis placed on material considerations, Senegalese society is greatly influenced by class distinctions. This also limits the choices that women are able to make, because they do not have the opportunity to marry the men they love. For instance, a woman of a lower class will find it difficult to be married into a wealthy family. Aunty Nabou is bent on finding a new wife for her son, because she believes that Aissatou, the goldsmith's daughter, is not fit to be her daughter-in-law and cannot bring happiness into the family, precisely because she comes from a different class. In consequence, Aunty Nabou believes that a goldsmith's daughter 'will just burn everything on her path like the fire in a forge' (26). In other words, her son will never be rich, because his wife is believed to be one of the accursed, as the daughter of a lowly goldsmith. Mankaasi comments on this, observing that because Aissatou is from a lower caste and is married to Mawdo who is of noble birth, society persecutes her for marrying a man she loves. Indeed, this is the reason why her mother-in-law detests her so much and finally finds another wife for her son (2008: 53). Aunty Nabou clings to tradition because she feels that the modern world does not give her enough room to exercise her privileged position in society. As a result of this, she feels she cannot let Aissatou compromise her privileges. Rama recalls this, observing ironically that 'Aissatou will never tarnish her [Aunty Nabou's] noble descent' (28). All in all, Aunty Nabou lives in her own world: 'She lived in the past, unaware of the changing world. She clung to

old beliefs. Being strongly attached to her privileged origins, she believed firmly that blood carried with it virtues' (26).

Mankaasi goes on to observe that Binetou's mother is eager to have her married to Modou for the opposite reason, despite the age difference between him and her daughter. Motivated by self-interest, Binetou's mother too wants to elevate herself from her poverty-stricken life by 'moving from the lower caste to the upper caste, to which she will become connected if her daughter marries an upper-caste man' (53). This elevation will make her respected in society. She also wants to acquire new furniture and the new title, Alhaja, which she will attain as a result of Islamic tradition. Consequently, both Binetou's mother and Modou destroy Binetou's future. Binetou's mother gives her daughter no chance to make her own decision. Instead 'she begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house as the man has promised them. So she accepted' (36).

The South African writer Ngcobo reinforces this point, noting that this is a widespread tendency, when she states that an African girl child is born to fulfill a specific role, for she is trained to be a suitable wife from a very early age (1991: 194). This was done in order to make sure that the girl child would become a 'valuable' commodity, as is evident in *So Long a Letter*, the bride's family would be able to gain materially from marriage to a prosperous man. Then, for instance, in Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want* (1980), Gathoni strives for her freedom from her mother Wangeci, who wants her to marry a husband who will be able to buy a spring bed for her. Comparably, in Nigerian writer Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009), Ola, a pretty young woman, is pressurized into marrying an older wealthy man with whom she has nothing in common by her mother, who wishes to enjoy the pleasures and comforts her daughter's husband's money will provide. Ola's marriage is an unhappy one, as she is forced to end her relationship with the unemployed young man she loves. In *So Long a Letter*, the women most affected by this tendency are the young girls, Binetou and young Nabou. Binetou, for instance, cannot continue with her education because her mother wanted to marry her to a rich man, in order to make her own life easier. Rama recalls: 'The young girl, who was very gifted, wanted to continue her studies, to sit for her baccalaureate. So as to establish his rule, Modou, wickedly, determined to remove her from the critical and unsparing world of the young' (10).

The above quotation shows that a young woman whose destiny is determined by a man and older people stands no chance of refusing what has been planned. The word ‘wickedly’ shows the extent to which the Binetou is denied the chance to enjoy her youth. If she had stayed amongst her peers, she might have developed a more critical, questioning mind, and perhaps acquired the ability to speak for herself, but she is denied this. Binetou’s fate is illustrative of the way in which the girl child is at a disadvantage, because she is brought up to be married, hence it becomes difficult for her to pursue her goals in life and develop her own capacity for independent self-expression. Furthermore, by marrying off young Nabou to Mawdo, Aunty Nabou contributes to the oppression of the girl child. Rama comments on this, saying: ‘Young Nabou grew up beside her aunt, who has earmarked her as the spouse of her son Mawdo’ (46). The term ‘earmarked’ implies that all other opportunities for young Nabou have been blocked and that she has been turned into a piece of property that can easily be disposed of. Binetou is similarly affected, because her future is at the mercy of her mother, who not only supports the patriarchal system but is so poor that she cannot tolerate the idea of her daughter refusing to marry a rich man.

Binetou’s mother does not care that her desire for fine things in life makes her sacrifice her daughter’s happiness and future. Thus Rama observes that “Binetou, like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence” (39). The word ‘lamb’ refers to Binetou’s youth and helplessness, and ‘altar of affluence’ refers to the worship of wealth in her society. Binetou ceases to live her own life, and she dies inside as she watches her other friends enjoy their youth, as the preceding quotation indicates. In order for Modou to have total control over his young bride and to satisfy his sexual desires, he decides to remove Binetou from school and marries her, thereby bringing her totally under his control. The institution of marriage is distorted by the way in which women become not only victims of male lust and vanity but also victims of women’s greed and desire to enhance their social status, as is evident in Aunty Nabou’s case. This affects the educational and experiential development of female children, who are removed from school. Also, it renders them unable to become professional salaried people, and thus they are economically dependent on their husbands. After observing the extent to which Binetou had deteriorated, Rama states: ‘At the age of love and freedom from care, this child is dogged by sadness’ (4). Binetou’s mother does not realize that there is more to life than just the material comforts she desires, such as the happiness of her child.

As we have seen, for instance, Binetou has her future decided for her and she has no say in the matter. Marina Deegan comments further on the boundaries that surround women such as Binetou and young Nabou: '[C]onfined by their low position in society, their social and economic powerlessness, and most importantly by the restricting definitions of womanliness, women are forced to repress all their natural ambitions and inclinations' (1994: 43).

This description of a woman satisfies the proponents of polygamy and patriarchy. According to the dictates of African tradition, a woman is a good wife if she observes the status quo by, for example, not challenging her husband and looking after the children. This leaves women in a situation in which they are not able to support themselves, because their primary role in life is that of a wife and mother, to the exclusion of all else. They become the property of men, thus making them commodities that men can treat in any way they choose. As we have seen, this state of affairs can encourage selfish, irresponsible behaviour of the part of men.

As this chapter has already indicated, Rama is also angered by the cultural practice of inheritance and thus she is able to break the silence when Tamsir proposes to marry her as a second wife. In various respects, this practice furthers the commodification of women, as Fonchingong observes: '[I]nheritance and succession rites in which surviving male relatives of a deceased man may inherit his surviving wives, reduce women to the level of commodities' (140). Tamsir does not wait until the mourning period is over, which shows that he perverts tradition in a bid to get Rama's hand before another suitor does, particularly because he feels that, as Modou's widow and a woman earning a salary of her own, marrying her might be in his interests for reasons of material gain. Thus, women are viewed as potential sources of material gain, and this may inflict forms of suffering on women. Rama endures much pain, including the practices that take place at her husband's funeral, which strips her of all her possessions. She describes this: 'The name of the deceased, who was popular, has mobilized a buzzing crowd, welcomed in my house that has been stripped of all that could be stolen, all that could be spoilt'(5). All this takes place because she is a woman, as she observes:

This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; Her behavior is conditioned: no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable (4).

Boyce Davies comments on this practice within marriages in African societies and observes:

[I]t is the privilege that is accorded to males in marriage in general and the concomitant loss of status that is the females. Women are stripped of everything, whilst men are elevated and have systems that support them, even when they need the support of their husbands (1986: 9).

Rama makes it clear that the practice of property inheritance is dreaded, meaning it is a routine that takes away the happiness of many women because they know that they will be expected to 'sacrifice' (4) what belongs to them unwillingly. A comparable situation is evident in a film by Dangarembga entitled *Neria* (1993), which relates the story of a widow in a Zimbabwean context. In the film, the widow is left to take care of her children in a house that has been stripped bare, its contents having been fought for by the relatives of the deceased. In *So Long a Letter*, despite the fact that it is the widow who needs support both materially and emotionally, it becomes apparent that her husband's funeral ceremony becomes an event that is anticipated by relatives, in that it can provide a means of gaining money and property. Rama is shocked and appalled by a situation of this kind: 'Thus our family-in-law take away with them a wad of notes, painstakingly topped, and leave us utterly destitute, we who will need material support' (7). Rama is the only person who seems to be mourning, while on the other hand, the funeral ceremony also becomes a fund-raising opportunity for the relatives, who also expect something from her when it is time for them to depart. This is indicative of the materialistic nature of the society in which Rama lives, in which individual material gain is pursued at the cost of human relationships. Again, this does harm to Rama, who endures all silently. She writes: 'The 'goodbyes' following one after the other at an infernal rate are irritating because they are neither simple nor free: they require, depending on the person leaving, sometimes a coin, sometimes a banknote' (7). Rama is disgusted at the ways in which the original intent and purpose of these ceremonies and rituals are debased and encourage the commodification of women.

Having examined the ways in which women are oppressed when they are perceived as mere commodities, the next form of oppression, woman-to-woman oppression, will be discussed. There is, therefore, a need for women to struggle against patriarchal power not only within the family structures and society, but also at times when they may also need to take a stand against other women within these structures who act as agents of patriarchal authority.

## **Women as oppressors**

In the society in *So Long a Letter*, there are women who are indoctrinated to the extent that they actively practice, maintain and perpetuate oppressive traditions. Such women see other women as born to serve men, without choices and destined to live their lives in exactly the way in which they have led their own under patriarchal oppression. Moreover, such women emphasize that traditional beliefs should be preserved and that a woman should know her place in this society, thus further perpetuating the oppression of women. Lindorfer concurs with this, providing evidence that this is a widespread tendency in Africa in which women actively practice and maintain oppressive customs and that women themselves are behind some of these dehumanizing practices (127). Mercy Amba Nwachuku expands on this, observing that the oppression of women in Africa is further worsened by female collaboration with male oppressors. For instance, in the midst of the observation of widowhood rituals, female pressure groups are formed to monitor the fulfillment of all parts of the ritual (cited in Lindorfer, 2007: 128). There are, for example, the women who help Rama to go through her mourning period, occasionally bringing her a change of clothes. The socially sanctioned forms of suffering imposed on the widow extend long after the funeral and other women help enforce this. According to Islamic religion, the mourning procedure itself requires a woman to mourn for her husband for forty days whilst in seclusion. This is stifling in itself, and Rama is considerably affected by it, because she laments: '[M]y seclusion has withered me. Worries have given me wrinkles; my fat has melted away. I often tap against bone where before there was rounded flesh' (72). It is as though mourning is a form of punishment, and it is almost as if the blame for Modou's death is placed upon her.

Moreover, Rama is secluded from others, although she is the one who needs to be comforted. The mourning process is also hygienically questionable, considering the fact she was only allowed to change her clothes twice a week. Rama describes her feelings, stating: 'Alone, I live in a monotony broken only by purifying baths, the changing of my mourning clothes every Monday and Friday' (8). As a word like 'monotony' suggests Rama shows that she is bored by the unchanging routine of her mourning days which she endures in loneliness. On another level, this highlights a limitation of womanism. While womanists critics such as Ogunyemi draw attention to the valuable aspects of African tradition, they downplay its harmful features, such as these. Inasmuch as Ogunyemi discusses this novel in the light of womanism, her analysis is limited as she overlooks these aspects.



Aunty Nabou, like Binetou's mother, clings to beliefs that continue to suppress other women's voices. Both women believe that a daughter should make her mother live comfortably and that women must marry men from the same social group, or from a superior social group. She tries as much as she can to mould young Nabou into a submissive woman, in accordance with various African traditions, thereby disempowering her.

Moreover, Aunty Nabou is unaware that especially as a result of economic imperatives, the world in which she is now living requires men and women to have equal opportunities, and thus they both require an adequate education. Instead, Aunty Nabou lives in the past and "devotes herself with the affection of a tigress to her 'one and only man', Mawdo Bâ" (26). Aunty Nabou furthers what she views as her son's interests, in accordance with the male-oriented dictates of her society. She becomes disappointed when Mawdo does not follow the path she wishes him to follow and marries Aissatou, the goldsmith's daughter. This shows the distress that women undergo when they expect much from their sons, yet do not receive what they desire. Therefore, Aunty Nabou expresses happiness when she succeeds in marrying young Nabou to her son, Mawdo, saying: 'humble blood has returned to its source' (30).

Further to this, various women are caught in between clashes between opposing factions, and in these situations, they are used as sacrifices, peace offerings or as a means of punishing others. Due to Aunty Nabou's hatred of Aissatou, she uses young Nabou to take revenge upon Aissatou for marrying her son, despite her social background. She renders young Nabou docile and disempowers her by only telling her folktales, instead of providing her with a modern formal education, thereby depriving her of a possibility of realizing her potential. As a result of these convictions, Young Nabou is deprived of her right to education, which Aunty Nabou believes kills all the virtues in a woman (30).

When women decide to unite and resist these practices, they will be in a better position to achieve self-actualization. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, a Nigerian critic, affirms that if such oppressive aspects are not resisted by many women, they will remain impediments in women's struggle for empowerment. She reinforces the need for women to unite and fight against oppression and cease oppressing one another. She argues that this will only take place when women do not let themselves become so enslaved by patriarchal norms and practices

that they seek to perpetuate them and become their own people, living their lives outside patriarchal control. Thus, she posits that:

All this calls for women who love other women and do not hand them over to be crucified because of men. This constitutes a trap for all on the margins of power, and is, therefore, a road block on the way forward. The way forward for us is impeded for us in Africa by the 'fear woman' mentality (cited in Lindorfer: 128).

It is only when women stop doubting themselves and also when women express themselves freely without having 'fear', and also when they know that they support each other, that they will be able to attain individual selfhood. This also corresponds with the womanist concerns that there is need for all black women to achieve self-realization. This is a way of discouraging the regressive spirit in some African women, such as in some of that Islamic society in *So Long a Letter*, in which they view themselves as men's property and encourage other women to view themselves in the same light. This is evident, for instance, when Farmata tries to encourage Rama into a second marriage, saying: 'Why are you afraid to make a break? A woman is like a ball; once a ball is thrown, no one can predict where it will bounce. You have no control over where it rolls, and even less over who gets it. Often it is grabbed by an unexpected hand' (40).

This highlights the extent to which some women have been disempowered, viewing themselves and others as a 'ball' which is controlled by the one who kicks it. The vulnerability of women in this society is such that even women themselves do not always notice how much they are being oppressed, despite the fact that they know they have no control of their lives. For example, Farmata thinks Rama is an ungrateful woman who cannot accept the proposals of the man who wants to marry her. She thinks Rama is willfully and heedlessly taking control of her life, which a 'respectable' Islamic woman is not expected to do. As Farmata's words suggest, it is also believed that a woman is not supposed to question anything a man does. No matter how much a woman might decide to plan and shape their future, it is only the man who has the final say.

All in all, the norms and practices that oppress women continue to be perpetuated in societies such as Rama's and other parts of the African continent, including those in the two other primary texts, partly because of the women who endorse and help further these forms of

oppression. In particular, the oppression of women is perpetuated by the older women in societies as the one in *So Long a Letter*, who support the patriarchal system and the forms of social conditioning that have been passed down to them by their mothers, regarding obedience and compliance as good female qualities. Naturally, when one is denied a voice and is oppressed, one can become helpless. The next section will examine another level of oppression that works hand in hand with polygamy and commodification to reinforce the oppression of women: docility.

### **Docility**

Docility is a term that is used to indicate submissiveness, compliance or passivity. It manifests itself in diverse African societies in which women are expected to behave in this way such as the societies in the primary texts. Nasimuyu-Wasike discusses the vulnerability of women in some African societies, observing that these societies educate women to believe that they are subservient to men, and that their purpose is to make men wealthy by bearing many children and producing substantial amounts of food (cited in Lindorfer: 2009). Combined with other forms of oppression, expectations of this nature relegate women to the margins, forcing them to be passive, in order to be regarded as ‘good’ African women and to be able to perceive themselves as such. Then, in Islamic law it is stated that a man is a woman’s protector and the traditional belief prevails that the man is the head of the house, and therefore a woman ought to show utmost respect to him. Women tend to repress themselves as a result of this, as Binetou and as do various key female figures in the other two primary texts. As women are regarded as part of a man’s property, they are never in a position to disagree or fight back. This is evident in *So Long a Letter*, as Aunty Nabou makes sure that she instills submissiveness in young Nabou. Rama recalls this, saying; ‘Her aunt never missed an opportunity to remind her of her royal origin, and taught her that the first quality of a woman is docility’ (29).

The Islamic society in *So Long a Letter*, in which women’s subordinate status is reinforced by longstanding patriarchal African tradition, women are trained to be dutiful and expected to be submissive to their husbands. For instance, Rama is required to relinquish a life of her own and live the life of the man who has married her, “giving up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her” (4). She is expected to change her behavior as well, in order to impress her family in-law. Thus, women are reduced

to mere property, devoid of feelings and individual identities, as evident in the word ‘thing’. Then, if they ever do display their own feelings, these are less important than those of their male companions. Another example of a situation of this nature is depicted in the Cameroonian writer Anne Tanyi-Teng’s *Ewa and Other Plays* (1964), which Ewa has no say in her marital home. Fonchingong observes that she is subjugated to the extent that she cannot learn any trade to further her education. Her situation is comparable to Binetou’s in this respect. Ewa sadly remarks to herself that “we are living in a man’s world” (cited in Fonchingong: 139). The word ‘conditioned’ indicates that a woman ceases to be an independent agent and is stripped of independent volition, becoming controlled and regulated by oppressive social norms.

Having examined the various forms of oppression in *So Long a Letter*, which are polygamy, the oppression some women inflict on other women, the commodification of women, and enforced submissiveness, the question now arises: are women left powerless and voiceless? The next section will explore the ways in which women struggle against these obstacles. It examines the ways in which women begin to act after ‘the rain began to beat them’ as Achebe’s proverb suggests (1975: 44). In other words, it will discuss the ways in which the women in *So Long a Letter* seek to express themselves and attain self-actualization when they realize they are being oppressed.

### **Possibilities of Empowerment**

According to Cheryl E. Czuba, a political analyst in the United States, ‘empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by enabling them to take action on issues they define as important’ (1999: 57). The women in the novel encounter many hindrances in their journey towards empowerment. Although some of them manage to transcend these, others remain trapped. For instance, *So Long a Letter* depicts the ways in which polygamy in combination with other factors, such as inadequate education, the desire for material gain and being forced into youthful marriages places some women in a situation that renders them unable to take care of themselves. Deegan observes that liberation means more than having economic and educational opportunities (41), but we see that Binetou and young Nabou are deprived even of these. On the other hand, there are various strategies that Rama and certain other characters in the novel employ in order to

survive emotionally and psychologically and attain greater self-sufficiency and self-awareness, despite the way in which their society is ruled by oppressive cultural and religious beliefs that may hinder any possibilities of self-actualization.

First, Rama is able to reflect on issues during her mourning period which then enables her to make important decisions in her life. Unlike Binetou and young Nabou, Rama refuses to be confined and silenced, thus challenging the dominant codes of conduct in her society, in which women are expected to be voiceless. However, if a woman cannot speak for herself, she is represented by others and thus often misrepresented. For instance, Binetou suffers because she is misrepresented by her mother who seeks to satisfy her material needs, consequently perceiving her as a commodity rather than an independent individual with wishes and feelings of her own. As a result of situations such as this, a woman may be forced into marriages in which she is not willing to be a participant. Binetou and other women like her lack the capacity for self-expression which enables a woman to attain self-realization and be recognized by others as an independent being. Consequently, many women have learnt to remain silent and, as we have seen, this is a tradition that has been passed on from mothers to daughters.

Nonetheless, Rama refuses to be silent and denies Tamsir's proposal by firmly telling him that she is a woman who knows her value, not just a piece of property that someone can dispose of as they please. She is also able to object to the unfair representation of women in parliament to Dauoda Dieng, because it undermines women. Further to this, Rama challenges the odds and instead of wallowing in hurt and resentment over her broken marriage, she decides to find herself. Certain characters in the novel manage to overcome various forms of oppression in their societies in diverse ways. For instance, Rama empowers herself through her relationships with other people, especially through her letter to Aissatou, friends and family, and she draws strength from custom and tradition. According to Taiwo, Bâ seeks to depict that which women can achieve once they have overcome their oppression (18).

As a result, Rama becomes a different African woman, in contrast to the stereotypically docile traditional woman who mutely and passively surrenders to the whims and dictates of the African man. Rama is acting out of the cry from the heart of which Bâ speaks, as mentioned in the Introduction. Bâ maintains that women are crying, in both a literal and

figurative sense, due to various oppressive customs and practices which cause them suffering and pain. The form of a 'cry' of this nature can shape the way in which women strive to overcome that which oppresses them. The 'cry' from the heart is also a way of speaking out, one example of which is evident in Rama's letters to her friend Aissatou, who listens to Rama as she pours out her pain and generates strength within herself.

Having acquired self-realization, Rama says "my voice has known thirty years of silence, thirty years of harassment" (57). This shows the extent to which Rama had been suffering in the marriage with Modou, denied of the freedom to express her thoughts and feelings, living the life that is expected of her, but not the one that she desires. This triumphant moment for Rama becomes a moment of self-discovery and self-awareness. Hendricks and Lewis describe how this enables Rama to acquire psychological empowerment and capacity for self-expression, and how it also serves as a form of consciousness-raising, thus enabling her to move forward in life (66). According to Susheila Nasta, Rama is reborn as if she had emerged into the light after a long journey through a dark narrow tunnel (1992: 56). Rama takes a stance that is different from that of Spivak's subaltern, who cannot speak for herself. Rama realizes that she had been rendered voiceless, but begins to find a voice of her own. Thus she is able to refuse the marriage proposals that come her way, which would mean falling prey to male dominance and oppression again.

*So Long a Letter* is thus a womanist novel, in that it suggests that, if all people in society could attain the self-awareness that Rama does, this individual healing and wholeness could extend to encompass the society as a whole. The images of freedom and fulfillment contained in *So Long a Letter* embody the visionary and inspirational aspects of womanism.

Bâ also compares and contrasts relationships between the older and younger generations. Certain members of the new generation are aware of some shortcomings in the older generation's relationships, thus some of them try to create some equality between man and woman in a relationship. For instance, Rama's daughter, Daba's relationship with her husband, Abou, is a clearer example of a healthy relationship. Rama is amazed at how her daughter and husband share duties. Then, when she accuses Abou of spoiling his wife, he says: 'Daba is my wife. She is not my slave, nor servant'. Rama admires this relationship, remarking, 'I sense the tenderness growing between this young couple, an ideal couple, just

as I have always imagined. They identify with each other, discuss everything so as to find a compromise' (73 – 74).

Rama does not only speak out, but she does so remarkably, by resisting all the forms of oppression that hindered her from realizing her full potential and refusing to be reduced to a piece of property that can be disposed of. In her letters, she does not only speak for herself, but for other women. For instance, she speaks on behalf of Binetou, who has to fulfill her mother's wishes and Aissatou, who chooses not to confront her source of unhappiness but decides to start a new life without the source of her unhappiness: that is, men.

Aissatou manages to become self-reliant, becoming a diplomat. This is not only an individual achievement, but also a significant example of women's capacity for empowerment. Refusing to be trapped by practice of polygamy that could deprive her of her sense of self-worth, she writes to her husband: 'That briefly put, is the internal ordering of this society, with its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. ...I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way' (32).

Aissatou notices that some of the practices in her society are meaningless, creating 'absurd divisions' between men and women. Thus, walking away would be a sure way of maintaining her sanity. She refuses to be victim and she decides to relinquish everything connected to the man who had sought to reduce her to an inferior, subordinate status. Retaining her dignity, which she calls her 'only worthy garment', she chooses not to be a part of this society. Her refusal to 'yield' shows that she refuses to submit to a system that degrades her. Moreover, Aissatou asserts that she does not wish to remain in her marriage for economic and material security, depicting her 'dignity' as the 'only worthy garment'. Her emphasis on her 'dignity' as the 'only worthy garment' suggests that a personal sense of self-worth is preferable to material comforts that might be available to those who do not retain their dignity. This also demonstrates that Aissatou has the courage and determination to embark on a new, independent life and to look within herself for forms of security and self-sufficiency. Even though Aissatou suffers pain and humiliation, she responds to her situation in a dignified way and this gives hope to other women, including Rama, which is one of the primary insights of the novel. Various women may draw strength from Aissatou, who realizes that she does not need her husband to empower herself.

Aissatou's situation contrasts with Binetou's, who is disempowered and is reliant on Modou as a source of financial security. While Rama does not approve of Binetou, she does not see young Binetou as an enemy, but she feels sorry for her because she has nothing to support her. This testifies to the strength of character she has developed, and is indicative of Rama's own personal empowerment. She is able to pity the woman that she would simply have viewed as her enemy, if she had been less secure within herself. Rama perseveres in a world in which many forces seem to be acting against her, establishing herself as a strong, self-aware individual in her own right. In these and other respects, that which she achieves can be viewed in womanist terms. Abrahams observes:

[W]omanism centers uncompromisingly on the construction of the self; both in the collective sense, as in that 'Black Woman' self we realize through communal activity, and in the personal sense, in that it offers a space for black women to develop a sense of individuality in a world where our experience has been over determined by external definitions of our identity which are racist and sexist (71).

In *So Long a Letter*, self-realization through communal activity takes place in the way Rama interacts with her daughters as she tries to educate them on topics that she is not sure how to introduce, such as sex and its consequences, if not practised the right way. In this respect, Rama takes the stance of a responsible African woman, who ensures the survival and care of the family. In Hendricks and Lewis's words, she 'ensures the socialization of the youth for the transmission of the black cultural heritage' (67). [H]ooks, Emecheta and Ogunyemi discuss the extent to which the family is of importance to the black woman. [H]ooks makes an important point when she notes that in many societies, family is a strong kinship structure, in which there is an environment of care for the young and the old. Indeed, there is mutual care in Rama's new family structure (34). She mentions the importance of her family, and although at times she admits that she feels lonely and wishes for Modou, she still has her family on which to focus.

Deegan makes a point that concurs with that made by Abrahams; stating that liberation should entail "the freedom to be able to redefine yourself, your position in society and your perception of that society" (41). Thus, empowerment is not easy, for these and other reasons. However, Rama has the strength of character and determination to attain empowerment, despite these factors. Therefore, she strives to make the best out of her life when Modou



abandons her, and later when he dies. Her views and perceptions of the society change as well. In *So Long a Letter*, we see that only some of the women such as Rama and Aissatou are able to redefine themselves, in that they are able to acquire the freedom to choose what they desire in their lives and develop the ability to speak out. Although it is a difficult process, they are able to do so because they are strong and determined. Women have different opportunities available to them, yet only some of them are equipped to varying extents to make use of these opportunities. In part, Rama is able to develop the sense of individuality of which Abrahams speaks because, unlike Auntie Nabou and Binetou's mother, she realizes that the society she is living in is changing. She sees that her society needs women who can fend for themselves, because of the limited economic opportunities available to both men and women. Women in some African countries, such as the ones discussed in *So Long a Letter* and in *The Joys of Motherhood*, often have to work and provide for the family. There is so much to do because the family is often large and they have to find means of bringing in more to ensure that the family is well fed. For instance, Rama tells Aissatou that she is the first to get up in the morning and the last to go to bed (20). Nonetheless, a working woman such as Rama has a double task, because she has her duties as a school teacher, and then she has to make sure things are correctly done at home. Thus, she works hard to make herself a strong woman in both a personal and professional sense and eventually she finds herself gaining a new lease on life.

Regardless of all the forms of cultural and religious oppression noted by Rama, and all the forms of women-to-women oppression discussed earlier, there are women in this novel who believe in the emancipation of women in Islamic society and encourage other women to realize their potential. Rama acknowledges the way in which women such as her headmistress inspired her and her classmates, as young girls:

To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us: these were the aims of our admirable headmistress ( 15 – 16).

In the above quotation, Rama describes how she becomes able to 'appreciate a multitude of civilizations'. Her expeditions to the cinema, another form of self-realization through communal activity, also makes her aware of the diversity of life experiences and choices that

a woman can have and enables her to discover another side of the world of which she had not been aware during her thirty years of marriage to Modou. Thus, she expands her horizons. However, as the above extract indicates, she also retains an awareness of the value of her tradition, which she does not renounce. As her reference to ‘universal moral values’ suggests, her sense of morality is enhanced, as shown in her capacity to feel pity for Binetou, and also her capacity to forgive her daughter for her untimely pregnancy and also the man who hits her son with a bicycle. Most of all, her enhanced sense of morality is evident in her resistance to other practices that she feels are not ethical, including embarking on a second marriage. All these factors contribute to, and are indicative of her personal growth and self-realization.

Aissatou, for her part, adopts various strategies in order to ensure her own economic, psychological and emotional survival and also her empowerment. She empowers herself and obtains a job that enables her to take care of her family without the help of Mawdo. She chooses to move away from a cultural practice that she knows is harmful to her, thus ensuring not only her own economic, psychological and emotional survival, but also her empowerment. Rama comments on this, observing: ‘Your stoicism has made you not violent or subversive but true heroes, unknown in the mainstream of history, never upsetting established order, despite your miserable condition’(11). Education becomes a very important means of empowerment for women such as Aissatou, who draws on her education to focus on her future, rather than mourning over her betrayal, as Rama recounts:

And instead of looking backwards, you looked resolutely to the future. You set yourself a difficult task; and more than just my presence and encouragements, books saved you. Having become your refuge, they sustained you. The power of books, this marvelous invention of astute human intelligence (32).

This also shows that Aissatou is a woman of strong character who knows that there is no use in crying over spilt milk. Rama is also able to put her education to practical use, becoming self-sufficient. But, in contrast to Aissatou, she does not divorce her husband. In doing so, she does not reject her customs and traditions entirely, but endorses those parts of her traditions that provide her with a sense of security and belonging, sustaining her and helping her to move on with her life, while rejecting certain parts of her customs that reinforce the oppression of womankind, such as the custom of inheritance when the brother of the deceased takes on his widow.

Rama can, consequently, balance the two different cultures that have an influence on her: the African and the Western. Although she appreciates western modernity, she does not discard her own tradition, 'appreciating a multitude of civilization without renouncing her own'. By this means she manages to create a dignified independent life for herself, while observing traditional customs and endorsing the value of family. This is in keeping with Ogunyemi's view of womanism as upholding African traditions. Despite the damaging effects that polygamy can have on some women's lives, such as preventing them from being able to realize their full potential, nonetheless some women, such as Rama, believe that they can achieve self-actualisation while remaining in a polygamous marriage.

Rama is also empowered as a result of other factors. She takes time to think about her life and does not let societal pressures confuse her, such as Farmata's advice to accept Dauoda's proposal. She is able to make a decision of her own concerning her life, for she says 'the final decision lay with me' (39). When one is able and confident enough to make an important decision of one's own, it contributes significantly to one's empowerment.

However, empowerment is not easy as it requires considerable fortitude and emotional, psychological and at times physical strength. Although Rama is an educated middle-class professional woman, this does not stop her from performing her duties as a wife and mother. Even though she is educated, that does not spare her from the daily domestic chores women are expected to carry out. The husbands in Rama's society, as well as those in many other African societies including those in the other two primary texts in this study, expect to have their food well prepared and their clothes well made. A woman is expected to do so, and Rama comments on the hardships this entails: 'The working woman has a dual task, of which both halves, equally arduous, must be reconciled. How does one go about this? Therein lies the skill that makes all the difference to a home' (20).

Rama's new found strength and self-awareness manifests itself in a number of ways. For example, she becomes able to control her feelings, taking time to think before she acts. This helps her to manage her crises. For instance, when her daughter, Aissatou, falls pregnant she does not condemn her as her neighbour Farmata would have expected her to do. Rama acknowledges that this was not easy, as she says:

I took myself in hand with superhuman effort. The shadows faded away. Courage! The rays of light united to form an appealing brightness. My decision to help and protect emerged from the tumult. It gained strength as I wiped the tears, as I caressed the burning brow (89).

This also shows how far Rama has gone in healing and empowering herself, while also indicating that the possibilities of greater empowerment, sources of comfort and reassurance do not come easily. Moreover, this extract reveals that Rama has created her own world: one shaped by societal pressures, and she does not allow other women who endorse narrow, patriarchal views to discourage or dictate to her, such as Farmata. Rama tries to reach out to her daughter, despite what was expected from her by society. According to societal norms, she should have condemned her daughter or expelled her from home. In part, Rama is able to act constructively and decisively because she thinks carefully before acting. If she had not taken time to think, she could have caused damage both to herself and also her daughter, who might have become depressed and hurt, and taken the wrong decisions in consequence.

Filomina Steady makes a related observation, when she states that the most important feature of the women in traditional African societies is her role as a mother. She further notes that the importance of motherhood and childbearing in African women's lives is probably the most fundamental difference between the African woman and her western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women (1985: 89). Thus, African women can draw strength from being mothers; and they can derive a sense of significance and purpose from this. However, as we will see in *The Joys of Motherhood*, motherhood can have problematic aspects. At this stage, it is worth taking into consideration a point made by Patricia Hill Collins. She notes that black motherhood is a strong institution that is dynamic and varies according to cultures, and that motherhood can serve as a site in which black women express and learn the power of definition and black women's empowerment (118). Therefore, some African women are able to make choices to be mothers and draw strength from this. The type of motherhood that Rama falls back on has been redefined. It is independent motherhood that has no patriarchal expectations. She offers her daughters a more empowering image of womanhood and motherhood which is free and strong, differing from conventional stereotypical concepts of womanhood and motherhood, in contrast to various other mothers in this and the other primary texts, who use their position to perpetuate forms

of patriarchal oppression, by training their daughters to submit to the will of men. However, whilst Rama values her role as mother, she is also able to attain a strong sense of individuality, independence and purpose in life, because her role as a mother does not define who she is, and it does not require her submission to male authority figures in her life.

Abrahams expands on other aspects of self-actualization, relating it to womanist principles, as she notes that ‘womanism requires internal and external honesty’ (73). This aspect of womanism is another dimension to Rama’s journey towards selfhood, indicative of the way in which she does not compromise her personal integrity in both an inward and outward sense. She displays ‘internal honesty’ in that she is true to herself and does what she believes is right. This could give rise to forms of ‘external honesty’ as she remains true to her principles in the way she behaves as a wife, mother and member of her society. She is also able to evaluate aspects of her society, traditions and culture in an ‘honest’, ethical way. Abrahams further notes that one should not seek validation from conforming to socially conditioned ways of seeing and codes of conduct, stating:

With all its inconsistencies and imperfections yourself is your most valuable tool for changing the world...as Africans we have been socialized to think of struggling for the good of the collective self (be it family, clan, village, nation or continent) as the highest, most legitimate form of validation (72).

Instead, by deriving a sense of purpose and direction in one’s life, and remaining resolute and ‘honest’ in one’s relationship with those around one, one can start to find meaning in one’s life and also regain a sense of pleasure in life. In this respect, Rama draws on the advice that had been given to Jacqueline by the doctor, who had simply said: ‘You must react, go out, and give yourself a reason for living. Take courage. Slowly, you will overcome’ (45). Thus, an important point that the author brings to our attention is that taking courage in the face of substantial setbacks and moving on with one’s life is possible.

Both Rama and Aissatou emerge from the same experience of polygamy stronger and placed in a better position to clearly understand, cope with, analyze and convey the problems and challenges of not only women but of their society. Rama’s ability to write a lengthy, articulate letter describing the experience she underwent during her polygamous marriage is indicative of this. Through Aissatou’s achievements it is clear that dwelling on the past only

wastes time. Rama comments on this, observing that Aissatou had conquered her past even when people anticipated her failure:

[H]ow I envied your calmness during your last visit! There you were, rid of the mask of suffering. Your sons were growing up well, contrary to all predictions. You did not care about Mawdo. Yes, indeed, there you were, the past crushed beneath your heel. There you were, an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life (34).

Bâ depicts two strong characters, Rama and her friend Aissatou, who refuse to be defeated by oppressive aspects of tradition. *So Long a Letter* is a powerful novel because we are presented with a central protagonist and another significant character who fight gender oppression and prevail against it in the face of considerable odds. Of the three primary texts, *So Long a Letter* contains the most strongly womanist vision. On the other hand, it also has feminist aspects because it depicts a woman who reconstructs herself in the face of oppression, thereby attaining inner strength and determination, a sense of purpose and direction in life and personal empowerment. Through a protagonist such as Rama with her capacity for powerful, insightful self-expression, Bâ breaks the silence which has often been associated with women in African literature, and in many African societies.

The way in which Bâ's character is able to fight the oppression which she is subjected to shows that there is hope for African women to live in dignity and harmony with men. It also draws attention to the way in which women can exist in their own right without the support of men. Moreover, Bâ celebrates the strength of African women, making her reader aware that this can be attained without the assistance of Western women. Then, in the process, Bâ also demonstrates the power of sisterhood or the importance of bonds between women. Although Aissatou is empowered by books, it does not mean that Rama's presence and encouragement was not important. This played a crucial role in strengthening Aissatou in her challenging times, and this shows the depth their friendship. During her time of need, Rama sought out the nurturing friendship of Aissatou and this shows that sisterhood can exist between women who understand each other and operate within the same frame of reference, and at a time women need to turn to their friends for support. Rama draws attention to this at the very beginning of her letter to Aissatou: 'Our long association has taught me that confiding in others allays pain' (1). Rama is able to rise above her problem, because she confides in her friend, and does not allow her bitterness to eat her away. Further to this, hooks also highlights

the importance of solidarity amongst women, which is a key source from which Rama draws her strength and courage, when she affirms that: ‘solidarity strengthens resistance struggle... Unless we can show that barriers separating women can be eliminated, that solidarity can exist, we cannot hope to change and transform society as a whole’ (44). As hooks contends, individual transformation of this kind ultimately has the potential to contribute to social transformation.

A comparable example of this occurs in Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1983), in which the bonds between Nettie and Celie sustain them in the face of male oppression. [H]ooks’s observation can be related to Rama and Aissatou’s situation, that they ‘are sisters united by shared interests, while maintaining an appreciation for diversity, and are united in the struggle to end sexist oppression’ (65). Another issue that their friendship brings to the fore is the relationship between writing and healing. Rama is able to reconstruct herself, developing a sense of self-awareness and self-worth also because she is able to express all that is in her heart. This leaves her at peace, while equipping her with the strength to move forward in life. Rama’s letters depict her own growth to empowerment and self-actualization, while also describing the way this takes place in the life of her friend, Aissatou. Thus, she experiences a spiritual transformation of a kind. The novel is visionary in the sense that it promises the reader a better future, if one perseveres. It highlights the forms of healing that come from within oneself. All in all, Rama’s letter to Aissatou testifies to her capacity for independent thought, and self-expression. In consequence, she becomes the female protagonist who expresses herself most freely and fully in all the primary texts analyzed in this study.

The next book to be discussed also examines women’s suffering at the hands of tradition, but from a different perspective. In Bâ’s novel the degrees of patriarchal oppression that women experience vary, and she identifies the ways in which the women are able to overcome and create strong identities for themselves, whilst Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* dies still oppressed. This shows that not all opportunities available to one woman in one specific context are available to another woman in a different context. This also indicates the diversity of African women’s experiences. *So Long a Letter* offers an important vision of the construction of self, which has the potential to inspire and empower other African women and in this way Bâ offers an effective way of responding to the problems that she highlights. The next novel will demonstrate that sometimes it can be very hard or even impossible for a

woman to overcome the obstacles that confront her. Some women are unable to exert meaningful control over their lives, and their fates are distressing ones.



## CHAPTER TWO

This chapter will consider *The Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta. Like many other African women writers, such as Bâ and Dangarembga, Emecheta seeks to depict the precarious position of women in a particular African society. Her works display profound discontent with the situation of women in the Igbo culture from which she comes, and through her writing she expresses her resistance to it.

Further to this, Emecheta's novel is a significant book about motherhood, examining the ways in which issues of motherhood affect women's lives in a traditional patriarchal Igbo society in Nigeria. Motherhood will therefore be the key theme to be analyzed in this chapter; and then other, often related, issues such as male dominance, the devaluation of the girl child, the pressure on women to be mothers, the sorrows of motherhood, and women as breadwinners will also be considered. Bearing in mind the above constraints, the possibilities of women's empowerment in *The Joys of Motherhood* will be also discussed.

Although there are various points of thematic correlation between Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, the latter novel examines some new areas. For instance, it focuses closely on perceptions of motherhood in one specific traditional, patriarchal African society. Moreover in this novel, as in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, specific racial, colonial and related economic concerns are highlighted more explicitly than they are in *So Long a Letter*. Interconnected forms of colonial domination, racism and economic disempowerment are issues that exacerbate the oppression of women in the specific societies in Emecheta's and Dangarembga's books. The chapter examines Emecheta's description of the socio-economic pressures that colonialism places on women and families. According to Patricia McLean, an African-American political activist, Emecheta provides 'a much-needed glimpse into the world of African women, a harsher one than that of the African male, because a woman is triply marginalized' (2003). A great many women in Africa suffer from gender, racial and economic oppression and Emecheta emphasizes this in her book. Next, while *The Joys of Motherhood* explores certain issues also dealt with in Bâ's novel such as polygamy, Emecheta casts further light upon this issue, bringing some new perspectives to bear upon it, as will be examined in the course of this chapter.

Although polygamy is an important concern, motherhood affects the life of the protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood* in a significant way. Commenting on situations encountered by women in African societies, Steady highlights the issue of motherhood and how it can hinder African women's personal empowerment, along with various other factors:

[T]he black woman's situation is different and amongst the things that make her situation different is the lack of choice in motherhood and marriage... enforced silence and a variety of other forms of oppression intrinsic to various societies which still plague African women's lives and must inevitably be at the crux of the African feminist theory (cited in Boyce Davies and Adams Graves: 7).

In its focus on many of the issues mentioned by Steady, Emecheta's novel clearly shows that these problems need to be addressed so that women can realize their potential and overcome that which hinders their personal development. Indeed, the possibilities of women's empowerment are limited in this novel, as a result of many obstacles Emecheta's women encounter in their lives, particularly those relating to motherhood. The chapter will not only evaluate the extent to which women in certain African societies acquire happiness through motherhood, but also the way in which women suffer as a result of the societal and cultural pressures placed upon them to become mothers. It is a widespread conviction in Africa that motherhood brings joy, but Emecheta emphasizes the fact that there can be a complete absence of happiness in motherhood. Therefore, the concept of the joys of motherhood is ironic in this book. Emecheta's depiction of motherhood highlights the way it can cause sadness and suffering to women, with the potential to hinder their capacity for attaining a sense of self-worth; and how, in this and other respects, it can serve to further patriarchal systems of control over women's lives.

The novel explores the ways in which women suffer in a society in which their identity is acknowledged in terms of their role as mothers through its focus on Nnu Ego, who strives to attain her socially ordained role as mother. This state of affairs stems from the way in which women are oppressed on the basis of their gender and have to live up to the standards set by a male-dominated society. This means that the joys that they are expected to derive from motherhood are within strictly defined sexist parameters and particularly benefit male members of the community. Given the problems faced by women in this society, and various other African societies with similar features, African and African-American feminism become useful critical approaches to employ when analyzing Emecheta's novel. African

feminism casts light on aspects of *The Joys of Motherhood* as a result of the way in which it opposes forms of gender oppression. Boyce Davies draws attention to this, relating African feminist theory to issues that affect the lives of African women, which feature prominently in *The Joys of Motherhood*:

African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to the detriment and does not simply import Western women's agendas. Thus, it respects African woman's status as mother but questions obligatory motherhood and the traditional favoring of sons. It sees utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygamy with respect to child care and the sharing of household responsibility, traditions which are compatible with modern working women's lives and the problems of child care, but which were distorted with colonialism and continue to be distorted in the urban environment (1986: 9).

In the above excerpt, Boyce Davies comments on the value of motherhood, while also drawing attention to its oppressive aspects, for instance the way it furthers patriarchal structures. She also highlights the positive aspects of family life, whilst indicating how traditional family networks have been damaged by colonialism and the socio-economic changes to which it gives rise. Such issues are also examined in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

As Emecheta relates Nnu Ego's story, she draws particular attention to some of the basic tenets of this patriarchal Nigerian society, in which women are denied independent lives of their own, existing to serve men. In both her marriages, Nnu Ego is bound by Igbo societal expectations that she bears many children, in terms of which notions of womanhood are defined. Women are not only forced to find their identity through their roles as mothers, but they are also identified in relation to men, as wives, mothers and daughters.

Thus, the chapter pays particular attention to how these aspects of women's lives are shaped by patriarchal norms which dehumanize women, reducing them to second-class citizens. Above all, Emecheta depicts how such importance is attached to motherhood that any woman feels inadequate if she fails to conceive children within a certain period of time after marriage. The Igbo culture has no mercy on barren women, many are returned to their parents, and immediately replaced. Many childless women in various other African societies suffer in a similar way.

The stance that Emecheta takes differs from that of Mariama Bâ, whose central character speaks for herself while Nnu Ego is denied a voice of her own. Nonetheless, Emecheta does speak for other women, showing that there are some systems which are oppressive to women that need to be addressed, as does Bâ. Emecheta is regarded as a feminist writer because of the extent to which she focuses on women's suffering at the hands of oppressive male figures and patriarchal norms and practices. Another reason is also because womanism tends to be visionary, offering hope and reconciliation. This is not a feature of feminism.

However, Emecheta opts to be called a feminist with a small 'f' as the title of her essay 'Feminism with a small "f"' suggests. In this essay, she depicts feminism as a white, western, middle-class ideology that does not take African women's particular situations and needs into account (554). Despite the development of second-wave feminist theories, as mentioned in the Introduction, which take cognizance of interconnected forms of racial and gender oppression and create more spaces for black women writers' and critics' voices to be heard, the concept of feminism is still viewed with suspicion in some quarters. In the eyes of many African and African-American writers and critics, the term 'feminism' still seems tainted by its white, middle-class Anglo-American origins, and continues to seem bound up with specific white Western ideological approaches. Emecheta is aware of this. In her essay, she does indicate that black women's experiences and cultural backgrounds are different from those of white women (554). Her novels also draw our attention to this, in that they focus on the depth of suffering black women experience, as a result of their gender and interconnected forms of racial and economic oppression.

Emecheta also maintains that she is a feminist with a small 'f' because she is an African woman and would not like Western and African readers to regard her as an outsider, without a clear awareness of an African woman's experiences. However, it is worth noting the key differences between her fiction and critical writing, in the latter of which she adopts a more favourable attitude towards men. In her essay she praises 'good' men; nonetheless, she chooses to focus on selfish, oppressive men in her fiction. This bears out D.H Lawrence's assertion 'trust the tale not the teller', for Emecheta's novels cannot be analysed entirely in terms of the views she expresses in her essay.

Emecheta's bid to reaffirm herself in the African tradition is indicative of the fact that her feminist concerns can be related to aspects of postcolonial discourses. Ashcroft, Tiffin and Griffiths make a comment that has a bearing on this:

Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, sought to invert the structures of domination, substituting, for instance, a female tradition or traditions in a place of a male-dominated canon. But like post-colonial criticism, feminist criticism has now turned away from such simple inversions towards a questioning of forms and modes, to unmasking the assumptions upon which such canonical constructions are founded, moving first to make their cryptic bases visible and then destabilize them (175 – 176)

To an extent, Emecheta seeks to 'reinstate the marginalized', by highlighting the experiences faced by Nnu Ego, and other women like her, though there are few possibilities for empowerment available to her. Emecheta provides detailed information about the suffering of African women in a male-dominated society in which women have been marginalized for a long period of time. She also suggests that social harmony is impossible if certain practices such as polygamy, and the denigration of female children, which are detrimental to the wellbeing of women, are not revised by 'unmasking the assumptions upon which canonical constructions are founded'. These 'assumptions' include the excessive importance attached to males in Igbo society, and the extent to which a society of this nature undermines women. Through the challenges that Nnu Ego encounters and the way in which she suffers as a result of these, Emecheta then questions the 'forms and modes' upon which the patriarchal society in her novel is founded. Emecheta's fictional concerns are in keeping with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's view that 'male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies, in order to effectively organize to change it' (2006: 244). Thus, Mohanty observes that male violence may vary from society to society, so therefore critics and writers need to respond to and interpret this issue in their own ways in order to effectively work towards change. This reinforces the point made by hooks that experiences of women differ and therefore cannot be analyzed in terms of the universalizing assumptions propounded by the Anglo-American feminists of 1950s and 1960s (4). In this regard, Mohanty further asserts that 'sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be formed in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis' (244). Thus, it is necessary to bear in mind that Nnu Ego's specific situation is shaped by the particular nature of the society in which she

lives and various other factors, including her own character. This highlights that even within the same race, women's experiences can differ, and the reader is made aware of this in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

On the other hand, aspects of Anglo-American feminism have some bearing on issues in the novel. Like the Anglo-American feminists, most African female writers and critics who support African-centered forms of feminism repudiate the notion that a woman is but an appendage to man. For example, Ogundipe-Leslie asserts that the African women should be able to 'challenge her own perceptions and define her own freedom' (cited in Boyce Davies and Adams Graves: 1986: 7). Although Emecheta's principal character does not accomplish this, she demonstrates to other women that they need to 'define their own freedom' and not be crushed in the way Nnu Ego is. The need for women to be their own people is further highlighted by womanist theorists such as Abrahams and Walker who draws attention to women's need for self-actualization, and Walker also states that women should feel free to express themselves in the way they want (2005: xi). Emecheta vividly depicts the extent to which Nnu Ego suffers because she is unable to speak out when she ought to have done so. By doing so, she is encouraging women to be the kind of people of whom Walker speaks, the kind of women who are 'audacious and willful' (2005: xi).

Emecheta's presentation of Nnu Ego's suffering in a male-dominated society shows that there is a need for women to be freed from the yoke of patriarchal oppression in order for them to participate as equal human beings in their societies. As an African feminist writer, Emecheta strives to achieve this in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in that she seeks to empower some African women by making them aware of structures that confine other women, thus seeking yet again to '[unmask the] assumptions upon which canonical constructions are founded'.

As a result, the work of African feminist writers like Emecheta is significant in that it exposes certain forms of oppression in the lives of black women in specific African societies. Moreover, it serves to challenge some notions that these societies are harmonious and that women in them are happy, despite the fact that they are subjected to diverse forms of oppression. This indicates that in various traditional African societies in which these forms of oppression were prevalent, and even today, in some modern African societies in which women are still trapped by the oppressive aspects of traditional norms and practices,

relationships between men and women were and are not always harmonious and equitable. For example, Kirsten Holst Petersen challenges the assumption that women were happy in traditional African society, describing how this is depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. She draws attention to the irony of this:

[Achebe's] traditional women are [depicted as] happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in the traditional wisdom behaving like a woman is to behave like an inferior being (2006: 237).

As the preceding points in this chapter indicate, there is a need to address the oppressive norms and practices that are still prevalent in various African societies in order for women to achieve a sense of complete selfhood and personal empowerment. In light of the above-outlined critical concerns of black feminism and post-colonial theory, key features of *The Joys of Motherhood* that have bearing on these issues will be examined, beginning with a summary of the book in the light of these issues. Moreover, certain similarities and differences between this book and the novel discussed in the previous chapter will be touched upon here.

*The Joys of Motherhood* describes the heartbreaking story of a young woman who suffers at the hands of the Igbo patriarchy, a society that is undergoing far-reaching changes as a result of modernism. This novel takes a different stance from *So Long a Letter*, in that Emecheta's protagonist, Nnu Ego, lacks the possibilities to which Rama has access, because Emecheta is bent on highlighting the evils of patriarchal institutions and the social conventions such as **class** relating to these that hold women back in Igbo society. Both Bâ and Emecheta bring women's lives to the fore within these different contexts. In one of her studies of African women's literature, Boyce Davies sees the efforts of these writers as comparably bold, because 'writers like Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ question and overturn some of the entire traditional attitudes to womanhood and women's place' (14).

The story begins in 1934 and ends around the end of the Second World War, covering a period of great socio-economic, political and cultural change in Igbo society. The extent to which Emecheta's principal character suffers is evident from the outset of the novel. Nnu Ego makes her way to the waterfront of Carter Bridge with the intent of throwing herself off the

bridge because she believes that she has failed not only as a mother but also as a human being. As we have already noted, according to traditional beliefs in her society and many other African societies, motherhood is one of the principal components of a 'whole' African woman.

Thereafter, the story of Nnu Ego's mother, Ona, is told. She falls in love with an esteemed local chief, Agbadi, and bears his child, Nnu Ego. Sixteen years later Nnu Ego is of marriageable age and the father is determined to find the best possible husband for his daughter, as he promised her mother before she died. Accordingly, Nnu Ego is first betrothed to Amatokwu, and when she does not give birth, she is relegated to working in the fields and eventually returns to her father's house. Her father then marries her to Nnaife who, unlike her first husband, is ugly and he does not accord with Nnu Ego's expectations of a 'real' African man. He carries out menial, 'women's' work, as a mere washerman for a white man. Fortunately for Nnu Ego, she is able to conceive children at this point. Her husband becomes jobless and irresponsible, and some of her children desert her and others go against her husband's wishes. Nnu Ego is devastated and disillusioned and dies a lonely death in her village. The irony is that the joys of motherhood have proved hollow for her, despite her attempts to find happiness and fulfillment.

Nnu Ego's sufferings stem, to a large part, from the patriarchal nature of her society, but there are also other racial and colonial factors at work, which contribute to a significant extent to the tragic nature of her life. Nnu Ego derives her sense of self from her society, in which marriage and producing children are the most important goals for a woman. Her dreams of experiencing the happiness of motherhood are eventually thwarted, partly because of external factors that impose themselves on the original structure of her society. For instance, her sons eventually abandon her, seeking to empower themselves through education overseas. The impact of the socio-political and economic changes resulting from colonialism is felt throughout Nnu Ego's society. Unlike Rama, Nnu Ego is unable to speak about her ordeals, and is unable to express her feelings, needs and desires. Lacking a voice of her own, Nnu Ego is deprived of a sense of independent selfhood and has no identity outside the socially ordained designations of mother, wife and daughter.



To begin analyzing the forms of oppression with which women are faced with in this novel, male dominance will first be discussed, showing how it is a key factor contributing to the ongoing suffering of women in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

### **Male Dominance**

Ogundipe-Leslie describes that which takes place in some parts of Nigerian societies in the quotation below and this has a bearing on that which takes place in *The Joys of Motherhood*. In her essay she highlights the extent to which women are undermined by the men in their lives, making the following observation:

[W]oman as daughter or sister has greater status and more rights in her lineage. Married she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family, except for what she accrues to her through her children (cited in Boyce Davies: 68).

It is indeed true that Nnu Ego has an influential position in her father's family, as she is the daughter of her father's favourite mistress. She has everything she needs as a daughter and this is even evident from the way she is sent off to her first marriage, when she has a great many expensive gifts prepared for her. However, she is treated in a callous, disrespectful way in both her first and second marriages, in which she experiences patriarchal oppression. For instance, Nnaife commands her not to question his manhood, and when Nnu Ego answers him back, he quickly reminds her:

[W]hat did you say? Did I not pay your bride price? Am I not your owner? You know the airs you put on are getting rather boring. I know you are the daughter of Agbadi. Pity he didn't marry you himself and keep you by his side forever. If you are going to be my wife, you must accept my work, my way of life (50).

Although Nnaife acknowledges that Nnu Ego is important in her father's family, he insists that she has to be submissive now that he has married her and 'owns' her. Nnaife's emphasis of 'my' and use of 'owner' is rude and dismissive. In the society depicted in the novel it is clear that gender determines the way women are treated, and this also prescribes the way women ought to behave. One dimension of this is the exaggerated importance of the male child, whilst the female child is regarded as inferior. As Fonchingong observes, it is also apparent that gender inequality in Igbo society centers around the gender socialization process, which stems from and is reinforced by customary and traditional practices (139).

Consequently, the male child is made aware of his status at an early age, while the female child is undermined. For instance, Oshia refuses to undertake the task of fetching water he had been given by Adaku, his step-mother, saying: ‘ I’m not going! I am a boy. Why should I help in the cooking? That’s a woman’s job (128). The way he expresses himself suggests that he undermines the duties women are expected to perform, viewing them as lowly and menial and he views women in a similar light, even at an early age.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, the relationships between men and women are shaped by Igbo society’s views of what constitutes appropriate ‘manly’ and ‘womanly’ behavior. For instance, we see Agbadi reprimanding Ona, thinking that he is entitled to be rude because he is a man. Thus, he instructs her to behave in a ‘womanly’ manner when she tries to forbid him from insulting her father: ‘[Y]ou see, you won’t even allow yourself to be a woman. You are in the first weeks of motherhood, and all you can do is to think like a man, raising male issue for your father, just because he cannot do it himself’ (22). It is clear from the above statement that intellectual capacity and the ability to express independent opinions is viewed as a male attribute and thus it is not ‘womanly’ to speak out. Agbadi maintains that a woman’s principal role in life is that of mothering. Thus, Ona should conform to stereotypical notions of female behaviour, by focusing on her duties as mother. As Agbadi’s words suggest, women can be criticized freely, whereas men are infallible even when they engage in inappropriate behaviour. Women are regarded as people who do not matter, so much so that even their beliefs and decisions are viewed as insignificant, and this takes place on an ongoing basis throughout the book. The position of unquestionable authority that a man holds in a patriarchal society such as this one means that men are expected to be held in awe. As the above-cited examples suggest, this exacerbates the suffering of women, as is particularly the case in description below:

Agbadi was no different from many men. He himself might take wives and then neglect them for years, apart from seeing that they each received their one yam a day; he could bring his mistress to sleep with him right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him (36).

From the above quotation, it is clear that men feel that they can be ruthless and unfeeling towards women, as a sign of manliness. As a result of this, women are subjected to emotional abuse. Some of Agbadi’s wives are ‘neglect[ed] for years’, in part because he pays more attention to certain other wives. This highlights the problematic aspects of polygamy, some of

which have already been depicted in *So Long a Letter*. As Bâ's novel and the above extract indicate, this institution serves the interests of men. Agbadi's wives are also treated as servants, waiting for their meagre food ration from their master: a single yam a day. All the while, they also have to accept their husband's offensive behaviour. He brings another woman to sleep with him whilst his other wives are yearning for his attention. We are told that they 'pined and bit their nails', which shows the extent of their frustration and misery. Again, the extent to which he neglects them is highlighted when we see their desperation for the smallest sign of attention, even if only 'a word', from him. Despite the treatment they are subjected to, Agbadi's wives cannot utter word of complaint, not only because it is unorthodox, but also because they are females, and they cannot question a man's behaviour. Thus they have no choice but to comply with the demands of men. Agbadi is a chief and his position of authority magnifies his abilities as a 'man,' enabling him to sleep with his mistresses "right in his courtyard" as a display of his virility.

This highlights the way in which polygamy is a feature of male dominance. Men still hold the power, so if they believe that this practice should be followed, they continue carrying it out regardless of what women feel. Various events in *The Joys of Motherhood* bear this out. For instance, when Nnu Ego delivers her first child; she has to 'stifle her labour cries so as not to wake her sleeping husband and Madam in the main building. It is only after the baby is born that Nnaife would be woken from his masculine slumber' (55). Again, it is as if Nnaife is a god, whose hallowed 'masculine slumber' should not be disturbed. This shows that he has total control in the relationship.

There are many other forms of male domination in *The Joys of Motherhood*, some of which stem from the fact that women in Igbo society have no choices. Not only do they have to defer to men in all matters, but also they are not free to choose their own husbands. In this and other respects, the women do not make their own decisions. Instead their society makes decisions for them, ensuring that men always benefit. It is the father's responsibility to choose husbands for his daughters, and thus Nnu Ego's father selects Amatokwu as her first husband and then Nnaife, unsuitable as he is, as the second. According to tradition, when Agbadi's village raids other villages he has the right to bring back with him the most beautiful woman or women as wives and slaves. These women have no say in the matter, they just have to follow him, whether they wish to do so or not. Similarly, Nnu Ego is

compelled to accept Nnaife as her husband although she is disappointed with him on first sight, so much so that even he notices this himself (43). It is only fear of social condemnation that deters Nnu Ego from running away. Nnaife's own recollections also indicate that women were indeed forced to marry men they did not love: '[H]e had seen a wife brought for an Ibuza man in Lagos running away at the sight of her future husband, so that friends had to help the poor bridegroom catch the runaway bride' (44). Although he is aware of this, he is so self-absorbed that he does not relate this to his own marriage. When women attempt to choose their own husbands, this can have dire consequences. Nnu Ego's daughter, Kehinde, refuses to marry the man who has been chosen for her, and this results in Nnaife's imprisonment and the collapse of his family structure (232). These circumstances show the difficult choices faced by women in Igbo society and other African societies in which similar practices prevail. Women in Igbo society are undermined in other ways. Not only are women deprived of their individuality and subordinated to men, but they are also denigrated. Consoling Nnaife on the loss of his son, his friend Ubani says:

How can a woman hate a husband chosen for her by her people? You are to give her children and food, she is to cook and bear children and look after you and them. So what is there to hate? A woman may be ugly and grow old, but a man is never ugly and never old. He matures with age and is dignified (75).

From the above quotation, the author shows not only the exaggerated importance attached to men in the Igbo society, but also the extent to which women are undermined. Not only are they not accorded a will of their own and permitted no say in important aspects of life, but it is said that a woman '[grows] ugly and old', whilst a man matures and becomes more dignified. As Ubani's words indicate, Nnu Ego is expected to accept Nnaife's wrongdoings because he is a man and she belongs to him. Men are always the victors, even in old age, and this shows how cruel Igbo society is to women. Meanwhile, it is as if the special authority that the man is believed to possess exempts him from growing old, whilst the woman to whom he is married grows old. Moreover, Ubani's words express the widespread belief that a daughter must accept the authority of her father and husband unquestioningly, because she is not supposed to 'hate a husband chosen for her by her people' (75). In this case, it is usually the father or another male figure that chooses a young woman's husband. The ways in which various forms of male domination outlined above have affected Nnu Ego profoundly are evident when she is questioned in court about Nnaife's attempted murder case, and she

confesses: 'Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other words he pays' (245). This extract shows the extent to which African women in societies such as this one are viewed as objects and are encouraged to view themselves as such. Moreover, they are not deemed worthy of support or sympathy in their time of distress. Nnu Ego's words show us that she has internalized her own oppression so much that she feels stripped of her own individuality. Women are controlled by men throughout their lives, and even if the man dies, he still controls the woman. Nnu Ego is also constrained by her father who would not be impressed if she refused to welcome another woman into her house as a co-wife, since it would run counter to her husband's wishes: '[E]ven in death, Nwokocha Agbadi ruled his daughter. She belonged to both men, her father and her husband, and lastly to her sons' (231). As this extract suggests and as we have already seen, Nnu Ego is never allowed to attain self-actualization and acquire a sense of independent selfhood.

Other, related issues are worth considering at this point. The following quotation draws our attention to some of the foremost issues that are discussed in this chapter: motherhood and womanhood, and how they are intertwined, in that motherhood in traditional Igbo society defines womanhood. Here, the speaker is Nwakusor, a family friend of Nnu Ego and Nnaife, who also prevents Nnu Ego from taking her own life by throwing herself off Carter Bridge. Despite the fact that he saved her life, the way he speaks to her is indicative of the deeply patriarchal nature of Igbo society. He first asks Nnu Ego why she would want to inflict such an act on a man, her husband, as if he were saying 'the air in you that you trying to take out belongs to husband or your father who controls it, have you asked for permission?' The way Nwakusor questions Nnu Ego also casts light on the place that women occupy in Igbo society - at the bottom of the social hierarchy. He sees womanhood and motherhood as noble characteristics that a woman should not dare defile, as do many other men in her society. Moreover, Nwakusor says Nnu Ego would harm the men in her life, whose property she is, if she killed herself: 'What are you trying to do to your husband, your father, your people and your son who is only a few weeks old? You want to kill yourself, eh? Who is going to look after your - and you? You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood' (64).

Attitudes of this kind are still prevalent in various contemporary African societies, including the Senegalese Islamic society in *So Long a Letter*, in which women have long been regarded

as possessions. However, in consequence, they may become like commodities that only appeal to the owner whilst still new. This is evident in Nnu Ego's situation, for she is abandoned when Nnaife takes a younger, more beautiful wife, Okpo. This tendency is also evident in the way Agbadi treats his women: 'He married a few women in the traditional sense, but as he watched each of them sink into domesticity and motherhood he was soon bored and would go further afield for some other exciting, tall and proud female' (5). Not only does Agbadi's behaviour demonstrate irresponsibility and self-centeredness, but also a lack of love and consideration on his part. Agbadi's behaviour also suggests that women cannot win, as they are not only expected to be attractive and enticing, but also dutiful mothers and wives. Yet, as they assume these roles, their husbands grow bored with them, which is ironic and highlights men's double standards, as discussed earlier. In Igbo society as well as various other societies in Africa and elsewhere, many women tend to be seen as mere chattels that lose their value with time and become less appealing to men. For instance, in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), Baroka, who is known as the 'lion', pursues the young, beautiful Sidi, 'the jewel', who seems more appealing than his senior wife, Sadiku. Further to this, *The Joys of Motherhood* suggests that relationships within the patriarchal society in the text lack intimacy to such an extent that women lose their self-confidence. For example, Agbadi's wives 'sink into domesticity and motherhood' so that 'he soon was bored' and would search for others (5). The word 'sink' suggests a decline and a defeat of some kind, in that women lose self-confidence and independence as they become absorbed into fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers.

The idealization of women as mothers furthers attitudes of this kind. In certain respects, this abstract concept that undermines women, diminishing their individuality by reducing them to stereotypes, as is evident, for instance in many of Ngugi's novels. Women who become mothers may experience various problems in consequence. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, they serve to provide entertainment to men and are soon spat out like kola nuts that have lost their taste, as evident in the way Agbadi treats his women. Indeed, women in the societies of *The Joys of Motherhood* and *So Long a Letter* are often oppressed as a result of the selfishness of the men close to them. The double standards at work in the above-mentioned societies give men the license to behave as they see fit. The women in *The Joys of Motherhood* acknowledge this and they also see it as unfair that one segment of society, the men, are allowed to behave in whichever way they deem right, while females are expected to be

subservient. For example, Nnu Ego makes reference to this when she tries to pacify her co-wife's anxiety over their husband's late coming: 'All men are selfish. That's why they are men' (156). Men's interests are placed before those of women, and to a certain extent women have learnt to accept little or nothing from men, as indicated in Nnu Ego's words. Although Nnu Ego accepts the status quo, Adaku protests against it, as we will see later on in this chapter.

As we have already seen, Agbadi's treatment of his wives stems from notions of manliness, which involves foregoing many other qualities. In order to boost their self-esteem, men also derive happiness from humiliating women. Not only are women debased in ways that we have already seen, but they are also humiliated in matters that require privacy, such as sex. For example, when Agbadi makes love to Ona, there is not much privacy, so that those around can hear the act '[G]runting like an excited animal with a helpless prey, he left her abruptly, still unsatiated, and rolled painfully to the other side of the goatskin. Having hurt her on purpose for the benefit of his people sleeping in the courtyard, he had his satisfaction' (17). This clearly demonstrates Agbadi's selfishness and also the self-centeredness of men like him in his society who view such behaviour as a sign of manliness. Moreover, this extract suggests that women's feelings are not considered and that they are not accorded space to express their feelings. Agbadi makes sure that Ona cries out whilst he makes love to her, so that everyone who hears it will think that he is a man who knows how to give pleasure to his women. However, Ona cried because this act had violated her confidence and self-esteem, and Agbadi had hurt her on purpose. To such men, sex serves as a means of proving their manliness, not as an expression of intimacy or love. Furthermore, when it involves many women as in the case of Agbadi, this serves as additional proof of male prowess. Thus sex is simply an act that gives them pleasure, and they do not really care about those who provide it.

Women, on the other hand are deprived of sexual pleasure, which is a form of self-expression. Women are not even allowed to show their emotions in other natural ways, as is shown through the way Nnu Ego acts when Nnaife returns from the war, when 'they both started to laugh sheepishly, not giving in to any kind of affectionate demonstration' (204). It is disturbing that a woman who had been alone for long period of time feels that it would be inappropriate to express her love and that her husband also deems it inappropriate to show his

feelings, because it would not be considered manly. Since women are denied the right to sensual and emotional lives of their own, it becomes much more difficult for them to attain a sense of self-awareness, as they are required to repress a vital part of themselves.

In various respects, colonialism also contributes to gender oppression in this society, partly because it undermines men's notions of manliness. For instance, because he is the white woman's servant, Nnaife feels inadequate as a man. Therefore he resorts to excessive display of male dominance to compensate for his bruised ego. He is always reminding Nnu Ego that he is the head of the house and her master, emphasizing that Nnu Ego should respect him on account of this: '[W]ell, whether we're in Ibuza or not, I am still your husband and still a man' (48). The forms of suffering colonialism inflicts on African women will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, for they are related to the economic hardships that Nnu Ego and other women like her experience. In this way, Emecheta illustrates how forms of racial and gender oppression can be interconnected, as does Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions*.

In a society such as this one and in other comparable African societies, it is often the women and female children who suffer most in times of economic deprivation. For instance, Nnu Ego's daughters have to drop out of school in order to ensure that there is enough money for the education of the male children. This also indicates that the needs of the male child are placed before those of the female child. Accordingly, in the following section the devaluation of the girl child will be discussed, casting more light on how such issues as race and gender have an impact on women's lives.

### **The Devaluation of the girl child**

In Igbo society, the girl child is viewed as a liability and the male child as a reliable investment. The social conditioning arising from perspectives of this nature affects women from childhood onwards. As we have already seen, a mother does not only have to produce children, but she also has to bear sons in order to be perceived as a 'complete' woman. Therefore, in the Igbo community, the status of a woman is determined not only by the number of her children but also by their sex. Consequently, every woman wants to have a son, and the importance attached to a son is evident in the way his mother is called by his name. Nnu Ego is referred to as 'Mama Oshia', 'in the customary manner for a woman with a male child' (115). Thus, in terms of social perceptions, a woman derives her own identity



from her son. Since Igbo women have been taught that a male child is much more important than a female child, bearing a son becomes a woman's highest point of achievement. This is also illustrated by Nnu Ego's words when she gives birth to a son: '[G]irls are love babies. But, you see, only now with this son am I going to start loving this man. He has made me into a real woman – all I want to be, a woman and a mother' (55). This demonstrates her own sense of joy and fulfillment when she gives birth to a son. On the other hand, if a woman fails to bear male children she may become bitter, as we see in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987). In this novel, Beatrice's mother is bitter to the extent that she hates her daughter. She had 'so desperately prayed for a boy' that when she bears a girl child she names her 'Nwanyibuife': a female is also something (87).

Once again, Igbo society is cruel to women. Adaku complains of the injustices inflicted on women who are unable to bear male children: 'The way they go on about it one would think I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband' (189). As her comment suggests, it is also ironic that her society stresses the importance of the boy child while undermining the girl child, who is also needed, because the continued growth of the family name is impossible without a woman. Yet, as Adaku's words suggest, a woman without male children is always subjected to insult and is despised by everyone in her society. This is evident when she calls the elders to solve a feud between her and Nnu Ego. But she fails to receive the fair treatment she deserves. Instead, she is made to feel bad about not being able to bear a son for the family. This 'made Adaku feel that since she has no son for the family, she has no right to complain about her senior's conduct' (186). She is further insulted by Nwakusor, the family advisor, who tells her to go and consult her *chi*: 'If I were in your shoes, I should go home and consult my *chi* to find out why male offspring have been denied me' (186). All in all, Adaku is made to feel that she is an incompetent and incomplete woman who has failed in her duty. This is yet another example of the forms of social bias that come into play concerning issues that involve men and sons. Instead of solving the misunderstanding between Adaku and Nnu Ego, the elders emphasize Nnu Ego's importance, because she has sons, while undermining Adaku, who has none. The significance attached to male children is apparent in a number of other African novels including Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. For instance, Okonkwo wishes that his favourite daughter Enzima, were a boy.

Prior to this, Nnu Ego is desperate to have male children in order to please her husband, as revealed through her displeasure at the birth of her baby girls: 'Hm, I know, but I doubt if our husband will like them very much. One can hardly afford to have one girl in a town like this, to say nothing of two.' (140). It is deeply disturbing that a mother is made to feel like this about her children. Moreover, this highlights the insensitivity of men in this society, who insult and offend a woman who has just survived labour. Once again, the irony of this situation is evident, in that these baby girls will become future wives and mothers, and they will prove financially useful. This is indicated by Adaku, who mentions this when she consoles Nnu Ego: 'Still, senior wife, these girls when they grow up will be great helpers to you in looking after the boys. Their bride prices will be used in paying their school fees as well.' (141). However, this also casts light on the extent to which the girl child is commodified, and also on the way in which women's roles as servants are emphasized soon after they are born.

The position that men hold in Igbo society influences almost all aspects of life. It is as if light emanates from men while women are the shadows that linger behind. Children are made aware of this at an early age. For instance, Agbadi draws his children's attention to these gender divisions: '[M]y sons, you will grow to be kings among men. My daughters, you will all grow to rock your children's children.' (27). Agbadi's words illustrate the gender inequities in his society. While women carry out menial, inferior jobs, men are expected to do more significant tasks and have many opportunities available to them, as suggested by the word 'kings.' Women exist only to serve others, befitting societal notions of the 'ideal African woman', without brains, desires or needs. As Agbadi's words intimate, only the boys are permitted to express their true feelings and be themselves:

It had always been the boys who had caused the headaches, because they would always be members of the Owulum family. The part of the daughters was to be of little trouble and allow themselves to be used by their families until they were transferred to their men (234).

As the phrase used by their families indicates, the girl child is treated like an object, regarded as functional when 'used' for specific tasks, but useless when she becomes 'transferred' to the ownership of another man. The phrase also indicates that the boys have a permanent place in the family, while the girls do not 'belong' to the family in the same way. Consequently, a

woman cannot even control her future. Even in marriage, the girl child is expected to make life easier for her brothers and in order to achieve this, it is required that the girl child should inherit the ability to do this, coupled with domesticity, from her mother. Nnu Ego tells her daughters to give up their lives by being forced into early marriage, in order to generate income for their brothers. 'But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When your husbands are nasty to you, they will defend you.'(197). Apart from emphasizing the fact that the female is less important than the male, while drawing attention to the extent to which they will be reduced to sources of potential income, Nnu Ego shows that she believes that a woman can never succeed without the aid of a man. She also warns her daughters that they cannot expect much from married life. Although she trains her girls to be independent in some respects by engaging in petty businesses, she also instills submissiveness in them through words like this.

The way the birth of a male child becomes a social expectation, placing pressure on women to be mothers of sons, because they want to be accepted by their society. This will be discussed in the next section.

### **The Sorrows of Motherhood**

Omar Sougou observes that 'in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego is a medium through which ideas of motherhood are interrogated' (2002: 98). Not only does Nnu Ego live in a society in which the ability to conceive is believed to make a woman complete, but she also earns more respect if she produces male children, and faces neglect and humiliation if she does not bear children. It seems as if women are recurrently obliged to produce proof of their womanhood, so this results in them wanting not only to be mothers, but also 'worthy' mothers of male children. Nnu Ego is aware that women who produce male children are respected in her society, and are regarded as 'real' women. Consequently, Nnu Ego's destiny is centered on her role as mother.

In her critical writing, Emecheta comments on the extent to which attitudes of this nature pervade African societies, exerting a profound effect on women. For example, this is manifested through the way people even pray for nothing else but a baby boy, as she describes below:

Most people want a man-child. The prayers will go: 'You will be safely delivered of a bouncing baby boy, a real man-child that we can make jolly with whisky and beer'. The pregnant woman will not protest at this prayer because in her heart, she too would like to have man-child, who will not be married away, but will stay in the family home and look after his mother when she becomes weak and old. In most African societies the birth of a son enhances a woman's authority in the family. Male children are very, very important (2007: 556).

Nnu Ego struggles to fulfill her destiny as an Igbo woman, which entails providing her husband with many sons. Motherhood has ambiguous rewards for Nnu Ego, because it is both a source of joy as well as a site of defeat. Nnu Ego's ability to bear children does not only satisfy her maternal longings and fulfill social expectations, but it also provides her with the principal form of identity she is permitted to possess, that of a mother, though she derives other parts of her identity from other aspects of her relation to men as a wife and a daughter. She feels proud that she achieved the highest goal in her life: that of becoming the ideal woman in the eyes of her society, so she thanks her *chi* [guiding spirit] for the birth of her sons, saying 'Thank you, my *chi*, that they are healthy and strong. One day they will become people.' (195). The pressure on women to be mothers is still evident in various present-day African societies and has not been affected by changes wrought by western modernity. For instance, a South-African based commentator from Zimbabwe in the *Mail & Guardian*, Fungai Machirori, observes that 'the roles of marriage and motherhood still define women today'. She states that there comes a time in a woman's life that she feels the need to fulfill her prescribed role as a woman, the 'maternal yearning is a natural thing, even if one does not fulfill it. I am sure it is even more poignant if one can't bear a child of one's own' (2010: 45). It is evident that the pressures that compel Nnu Ego to have her own children and fulfill her prescribed role of motherhood still grip many women in modern day societies, such as the one discussed by Machirori above.

In addition, a woman is only welcome in the family into which she is married for a certain period of time, during which she is expected to prove her womanhood by conceiving and bearing children. This places Nnu Ego in a stressful situation. Initially, when she fails to conceive, she fears that 'she was failing everybody. There was no child' (29). 'Failing everybody' shows Nnu Ego's sense of the depth of her failure and also her awareness of the extent of societal pressure placed upon her. This is also reflected in the fact that she is not surprised when 'Amatokwu told her casually one evening that she would have to move to a

nearby hut kept for older wives, because his people had found him a new wife. 'My father is desperate' Amatokwu had said (30). Nnu Ego is 'casually' informed of the new developments and her feelings are not taken into consideration, just as Rama is callously informed that her husband has taken a new wife after the wedding. Yet again, Nnu Ego has internalized her own oppression to the extent that she feels at fault, and that she deserves to be treated in this way. Therefore, Nnu Ego is 'not surprised', meekly accepting this development. Her husband shows no regret or guilt in the above passage, because as a woman and a 'failed' wife, she is not important. Surprisingly, the husband does not accept any responsibility for this state of affairs. He feels that he is infallible, because he is a man so the woman is the only one at fault.

Since they are the ones in control of polygamous marriages and are raised to believe that they can do no wrong, men tend to abuse the powers that they have. Such behaviour occurs in other African societies in which polygamy is practiced. For instance, one of the women in Kwa-Zulu Natal who was interviewed for the Third Degree documentary on South African television described how she had experienced similar treatment. She was not consulted about her husband's intentions of taking another wife, only to learn from her neighbours that her husband had embarked on another marriage. This has some striking parallels with Nnu Ego's experiences. The woman from Kwa-Zulu Natal mentioned in the Third Degree discovered what had taken place in a comparably 'casual' way.' She had to learn from her friend that her own husband was taking another wife (Patta). Another woman, Thembi Sibisi, from Blue Bank outside Ladysmith, also confirmed that she was disappointed when she realized that after a year she had not fallen pregnant, and she mourned, 'My mother-in-law sat me down and asked me what the problem was and when I had no clear answer for her, she told me that if by the end of that month I wasn't pregnant, my husband should start looking for another wife. Just like that' (Hlatshwayo, 2004:148). There are points of comparison between Rama's situation in *So Long a Letter* and Nnu Ego's experiences in *The Joys of Motherhood* and this woman's situation. In all these women's lives, the final and most important decisions are always made by the males or by women acting in men's interests. In these diverse situations, there is a shared assumption that the needs of men always come first. It is also evident that women who are affected by these decisions have been made aware of their subordinate status that they meekly accept the pressure placed upon them to bear children, and the punishment inflicted upon them when they fail to do so.

Like these women, Nnu Ego is viewed as a 'useless' woman because she has just failed her first marriage by being barren. In the extract that follows, Amatokwu, the man to whom she is married, clearly pronounces that barrenness is an unforgivable sin: 'What do you want me to do?' Amatokwu asked. 'I am a busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line' (31). Amatokwu sounds very harsh and unfeeling, displaying little concern for his wife's suffering. The repetition of 'my' also displays an air of self-importance, showing that all the blame is being laid on Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego is insulted and blamed for infertility, which is a natural biological condition over which no one has control. Also, she is even made to accept blame for faults that may not be her own, as shown in her confession: 'I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right' (30). Nnu Ego meekly accepts the blame even though she does not deserve it and she abases herself before male authority, showing us that she and many other women like her have been conditioned to behave in this way in her society. Therefore, she humbly accepts her position unquestioningly. The words spoken by Amatokwu also suggest the self-centeredness of a man in a society where manhood and its properties are valorised, and thus he refers to his 'precious male seed' (31). Even men, who undertake degrading jobs such as Nnaife, also take pride in being able to produce this 'precious male seed'. This is evident as shown at one point when, during a disagreement with Nnu Ego, he says: 'Leave me alone. Remember, though, without me you could not be carrying that child' (53). Nnaife emphasizes his manhood in this regard, as if men play the primary role in generating children while women just 'carry' them until they give birth to them. Here, Nnu Ego is reminded again that she should not forget that his manhood is important, because it will serve as a means of redeeming her from her unworthy femaleness and giving her an identity as a mother which she so much desires.

Again this has parallels with the situation of Thembi Sibisi, who also confirms how her husband treated her with contempt, regarding her as useless, saying: 'When I married you I wanted a wife, not a man like me'. This woman describes how deeply she was hurt by the words of her husband, because she had thought that nothing would ever destroy the love they shared. However, at this point, she was made to feel as if she was a piece of furniture and she felt like dying (Hlatshwayo: 148). Her husband's words echo those of Amatokwu, for here too, if a woman is unable to conceive, she is viewed as the source of the problem, even if it is

the man who is inadequate. According to a traditional healer who operates from central Durban, Mr. M.J. Madlala, men are always quick to put the blame on women and he says, ‘to [men] it was highly unthinkable that they could be anything but highly virile’ (Hlatshwayo: 151). He also reinforces the importance of having a child in traditional Zulu communities, saying:

You see when a woman gives birth to a child in our tradition, she is not only giving birth to her own child - the child belongs to the whole family. So if a woman fails to give birth, she is failing the whole family. She does not only experience personal deprivation, but lets down her family. Us Zulus see children as wealth and security. Girls bring wealth through lobola and boys ensure the perpetuation of the family and carry the family name (151).

It is worth noting that, like Nnu Ego, he emphasizes the idea that a woman has ‘[failed] everybody’ (29) when she does not produce children. Moreover, the need for children is not unique to Igbo and Zulu societies. Indeed, it is prevalent in many other African societies. For instance, in *Generations*, SATV television soap opera, screened on SABC1 on 27 October 2010, in which a mixture of various South African groupings feature, it is clear that children are depicted as necessary in order to bring honour to a man. In this instance we see how a man, Khaphela, is so desperate to have a child of his own, even though his wife’s age does not permit it, that they decide to undertake an invitro fertilization. This is indeed a mirror of the importance attached to a child in contemporary South African society, and elsewhere in Africa. A woman is expected to bear children for the extended family, who will be anticipating the growth of their family, as is evident in the above quotation. Also children are proof of a man’s virility, just as they are proof of a wife’s womanhood. Yet, it is the woman who is deemed insufficiently ‘womanly’ when a couple is unable to have children.

Ngcobo observes that in many African societies there are certain beliefs that shape human existence, some of which place pressure on women to give birth to children:

Central to many African beliefs is that there are three states of human existence- the land of the unborn, the land of the living and the land of the ancestors and the dead. Belief has it the children of any given family are always there waiting for the mothers to come and rescue them from oblivion and bring them to life in the land of the living. Failure therefore, to ‘rescue’ the children is a sorrowful capitulation and a betrayal. In cases of childlessness, people do not think of and share the couples or woman’s agony –rather, they hear the echoing cries of the unborn children that she (the mother) will not ‘rescue’ and bring to life (2007: 534).

Nnu Ego feels relieved at the birth of her son, but her joy is short-lived, as the child dies within four weeks. Under pressure from her society to be a mother, she is made to feel that she is useless; hence her attempt to commit suicide is indicative of the fact that pressures of this kind can have serious consequences. She mourns and tells the bystanders: ‘But I am not a woman anymore! I am not a mother anymore.’(62). As the people around her learn her reason for her attempted suicide, they sympathize with her but in so doing, they reinforce the fact that Nnu Ego is regarded as a failure in the eyes of her society, saying: ‘ “She is not mad after all, she has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren”. And they all agreed that a woman without a child for her husband was a failed woman’ (65). Nnu Ego feels the weight of family and societal expectations, and cannot find happiness within herself until she accomplishes what is required of her as a woman: to produce children.

According to the beliefs in her society, a childless woman is an embarrassment to her husband and Nnaife draws attention to this when he is quarrelling with Nnu Ego, accusing her of ‘[putting] Amatokwu’s manhood in question so that he had to marry again quickly and have many children in succession’ (51). His words also illustrate that women are seen as property that men can replace if they are not satisfied with them. Nnu Ego is distressed after the death of her child, but is relieved that she is in Lagos not Ibuza, where a substitute wife could easily have been found by her husband’s family, as if her child’s death were her fault. She reflects on this in the following way:

One of the advantages of being far away from home she knew, was that her husband’s people could not register her dissatisfaction with her by just getting him a girl next door as a surprise bride, neither could they easily interfere to persuade him to make a decision about her (77).

Phrases like ‘surprise bride’ indicate the swiftness and ease with which another wife could have been found for Nnu Ego’s husband. It shows that women like her live in constant fear because they see other women being easily replaced, so they fear that this will happen to them as well. Their tomorrow is not guaranteed, for a woman’s position can unpredictably and easily be overturned. Moreover, ‘surprise bride’ also suggests that younger women are reduced to little gifts used to entice men. Women, on the other hand, are made to view the world from a patriarchal perspective and measure their success in terms of patriarchal criteria, as Nnu Ego’s above-outlined responses to her situation show us. This limits women’s



possibilities for empowerment and undermines their ability to become confident and independent enough to express their true feelings without fear of intimidation, as they are always vulnerable to outside control. Then, even if they become mothers and have sons, women are not exempted from blame and scrutiny. A new set of expectations is imposed on them. They have to prove to be good nurturers and bring up the children to the satisfaction of their men. All in all, the demands of Igbo society are so exacting that it is possible that a woman may never attain a sense of fulfillment, on account of all the factors that could hinder her success. Consequently, as we see in the case of Nnu Ego, many of the so-called 'joys of motherhood' do not always materialize. For instance, even her hopes of being taken care of by her children do not come to bear fruit as the children focus on their own lives.

After rejection by her first husband, Nnu Ego is relieved to learn that she can conceive. Even though she disdains the appearance and occupation of her second husband, the birth of her son provides ample compensation for this. After the birth of her son she feels like a woman: 'She was now sure, as she bathed her baby son and cooked for her husband, that her old age would be happy, that when she died there would be somebody left behind to refer to her as 'mother'' (54). This highlights the extent to which the desire to be a mother of sons can diminish a woman's capacity to take joy in life. Instead of thinking about her future possibilities in life, Nnu Ego focuses on her old age and death, which is ironic, because she does not experience a happy old age and dies a lonely death.

Adaku is aware that children may neglect their mothers, so she reminds Nnu Ego that mothers cannot expect to gain happiness from children themselves but the mere knowledge of having them: 'In Ibuza, sons help their father more than they ever help their mother. A mother's joy is only in the name' (122). This shows that the Igbo society does not even encourage the natural bond between mother and child, as it is believed that the child, especially the much-valued male child, belongs to the father primarily. This is also indicative of the way in which women are deprived of even the ability to derive joy from their children. Yet again, this indicates how everything operates in men's interests, even their relationships with their children. The mother is supposed to find fulfillment only in the fact that she had given birth to children. Indeed, Nnu Ego even felt comfortable in her poverty on account of this: 'Nnu Ego crawled further into the urine-stained mats on her bug-ridden bed, enjoying the knowledge of her motherhood'(189). Thus, Nnu Ego '[enjoys] the *knowledge of her*

*motherhood*' rather than motherhood itself. As these extracts show, Igbo society only permits her to admire them from a distance, as if she were a stranger.

Further to this, it is often the case that a woman only receives praise when her children are successful. For example, Nnu Ego is called a 'mother of very clever children' (222) because her sons succeed in school, so she lives through her children and she does not exist as an independent person in the eyes of her society. Women are not even involved in important decisions for their children, and are sometimes excluded from significant interactions with them, as illustrated in Nnaife's command: 'Woman, why don't you go to your cooking place and let me talk to my son?'(225). His words illuminate some of the problems faced by women, even though they may be mothers of sons. It also shows that important decisions for children are made by their fathers, to whom they belong. Despite the fact that Nnu Ego has given birth to male children, Nnaife still speaks to her as if she has achieved nothing, addressing her as 'woman', showing how unimportant she is to both him and his society. He also reminds Nnu Ego of her place as a woman, the cooking area, and instructs her to leave the handling of issues involving her children to him as a man. In other words, Nnu Ego is expected to be a dutiful, submissive and silent woman who does not express any of her views to her husband.

Nnu Ego experiences further suffering as a result of her motherhood. For instance, she is blamed for not bringing up her daughters 'well', since they are not as docile and submissive as they should be. Nnaife resents her for this, to the extent that he declares he regrets the day he married her: 'I shall curse you till I die the day you came to my threshold. I wish I had never met you' (232). Here Nnaife uses very harsh language indeed, which is a form of verbal violence. He feels free to abuse her in whatever way he sees fit, because he is her husband. He addresses her in this way because his daughter had refused to marry the man he had chosen for her and this displeases him. Nnu Ego is further insulted when Nnaife tells her to leave: 'I have a mind to tell you and your brats to leave this house immediately. I was not created to suffer for you till I die' (232). Again, this displays the abuse and hostility that can be directed towards women by their husbands. The fact that Nnaife calls the children 'brats' is hurtful to Nnu Ego and insulting to the children because they are partly hers. The fact that her and Nnaife's relationship is characterized by tension and hostility of this nature throughout *The Joys of Motherhood* is indicative of the extent to which Emecheta's fiction is

closer to feminism than womanism in her depiction of men and the relationships between the sexes. Womanist novels such as *The Color Purple* and *So Long a Letter* do highlight gender oppression in relationships but advocate for harmony and healing, while feminist perspectives do not always believe it is possible ( hooks: 34;70). Nnaife just tells his wife to leave without taking into consideration that she too as a parent might be disappointed by the way their children are turning out and hurt by the way he insults them. She is even aware of this as she expresses her distress:

She was becoming fed up of this two-way standard. When the children were good they belonged to the father; when they were bad, they belonged to the mother. Every woman knew this; but for Nnaife to keep hurling it in her face at the slightest provocation was very unfair (232).

Again the unpredictable and unreasonable nature of male behavior in this book is highlighted in the above extract, in the insults that ‘Nnaife [keeps] hurling’ at Nnu Ego. It also seems that becoming mothers of children exposes women open to further attacks and abuse from the men who should be caring for them. Then, when Nnu Ego goes back to Ibuza in disgrace, she fast overwhelmed with distress as she does not hear from her sons whom she had hoped would console and wipe away shame from her:

It was not that she was physically poor; her daughters sent help once in a while. However, what actually broke her was, month after month, expecting to hear from her son in America, and from Adim too who later went to Canada, and failing to do so. It was from rumours that she heard Oshia had married and that his bride was a white woman (253).

Despite the fact that Nnu Ego has suffered all her life for her children, sacrificing so much for them, she does not reap the joys of motherhood. She realises this, lamenting: ‘It was true what they said, she thought, that if you don’t have children longing for them will kill you, and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you’ (239). As a result of all the tribulations that she experiences as a mother she never has time to rest. She worries about having children to please her society, but after she has them she also worries about feeding and caring for them and bringing them up in a way that will please the men around her. Then, once they grow up, Nnu Ego’s children do not provide a source of comfort to her, as do Rama’s in *So Long a Letter*. Nnu Ego’s sufferings as a mother are intensified by her ongoing struggle to support

her family. Yet, in the end she possesses nothing but the mere knowledge of the existence of her children which, as we have seen, is not sufficient, as will be shown in the section below.

### **Women as breadwinners**

The colonial time in which the story unfolds has an impact on the economic environment, which in turn has an effect on Nnu Ego. As a result of the socio-economic changes caused by colonialism, women are left to fend for themselves and their many children. Nnu Ego is pregnant at the time Nnaife is recruited into the army, so she has to manage everything by herself and also prepare for her coming baby. Walter Rodney explains how African women became economically deprived during the colonial period, and burdened with even more labour as a result of the way the traditional patterns of African people's lives were disrupted by the colonizers:

[W]hat happened to African women under colonialism is that the social, religious, constitutional and political privileges and rights disappeared, while the economic exploitation continued and was often intensified. It was intensified because the division of labour according to sex was frequently disrupted. Traditionally, African men did the heavy labour of felling trees, clearing land, building houses, etc, apart from conducting warfare and hunting. When they were required to leave their farms to seek employment, women remained behind burdened with every task necessary for the survival of themselves, the children and even the men as far as foodstuffs were concerned. Therefore, the deterioration in the status of African women was bound up with the loss of political power by African society as a whole and the consequent loss of the right to set indigenous standards of what work had merit and what did not (1972: 248).

A similar point is made by Colin Bundy, who describes the destructive effects of white minority rule in South Africa, and the extent to which this undermined various South African people's abilities to support themselves in traditional ways, thus requiring them to be wage-earners in the colonial economy (1979: 1). The above-cited quotation by Rodney illustrates the impact this had on women's lives. This situation he depicts is indicative of the effects of colonialism on Igbo society. This demonstrates the extent to which the economic situation of this nature makes it even harder for women like Nnu Ego to perform all the duties required of her as a good mother, in that she is now required to offer not only love and care, but also economic support.

In this and other respects, women are greatly affected by forms of suffering and oppression arising from colonialism, including those mentioned in the above extract. Moreover, as Cornish notes, women like Nnu Ego who are ignorant of the socio-economic and political changes taking place around them suffer economic hardships and nearly starve to death as a result of the way their lives are affected by the war between the colonizers without knowing what the conflicts of the 'Western powers' are about (4). Consequently, Nnu Ego asks the following question to her friend, who is as ignorant as she is:

'But, Ato, on whose side are we? Are we for the Germans or the Japanese, or the other one, the British? Then Ato responds: 'I think we are on the side of the British. They own Nigeria you know'. And Ibuza too?' Nnu Ego asked not believing a word. 'I don't know about that,' Ato confessed (108-109).

During the war, women are deprived of the support they need from their husbands, who are forced by the colonial authorities to go and fight in a war that, like their wives, they do not understand. Moreover, Nnu Ego feels the impact of colonialism because Nnaife is forced to go to war, leaving her with the sole responsibility of caring for her family. Thus, the power struggle between the colonizers contributes to the economic hardship of the colonized, as African peoples become caught up in the conflict between colonial powers, and they and their families suffer as a result. Emecheta's novel is set in the 1930's - 40's while Bâ's is set in a period with a very different socio-economic situation; the 1950's and the culmination of the struggle for independence.

Not only in Nnu Ego's case, but in the lives of various other women in Africa, women may not only be the primary care-givers for the children, but the principal breadwinners for their families, as is evident in Rodney's above-cited point. For instance, this situation prevails in some South African communities, such as those in the Eastern Cape, one of the most poverty stricken of the South African provinces. The following extract illustrates the way in which this affects women in Nnu Ego's position in Nigerian society:

In Lagos a wife would not have time. She had to work. She provided the food from her husband's meagre housekeeping money, but finding the money for clothes, for any kind of comforts, in some cases for the children's fees, was on her shoulders (55).

While she is in Lagos, Nnu Ego is constantly required to provide and engage in various petty businesses in order to sustain the family whilst her husband is often absent. For instance, she takes up trading that requires much hard labour in order to be able to afford to send her children to school. One example of this follows below:

[S]he took up selling firewood. This did not require much capital, simply a great deal of energy. One had to carry the wood from the waterside, break it into pieces with an axe, and then tie the pieces together into bundles for sale. Many other women found it too tiring (179).

The fact that the jobs Nnu Ego undertakes require much strength illustrates the fallacious nature of the notion that women are the weaker sex, thereby undermining notions of male superiority based partially on physical prowess. Nnu Ego struggles each day of her life, and she hardly rests, not knowing that it is all in vain. The responsibility of feeding the children rests solely upon her, as Emecheta describes how she saved every penny she had: ‘[I]n the evening she would count her money, put aside her little profits to go towards the food bill for the next day, and then go to sleep. The same pattern would repeat itself each day’ (195). The above description of that which Nnu Ego undergoes as she labours to support her family illustrates the extent to which women can suffer emotionally as well as physically in their roles as wives and mothers. Ogundipe-Leslie expands on this as she describes how women can suffer in this way because they may display particular love and care for their families: ‘[W]e are closer to human suffering through the experiences of motherhood and womanhood. We gain more compassionate hearts and thereby history has shown that women demonstrate more probity and commitment in situation of responsibility’ (cited in Busby, 1996: xvi). Nnu Ego feels obliged to carry out Nnaife’s duty, because she is afraid that people would view her as an irresponsible mother if her family were to starve. The extent to which she feels compelled to labour on her family’s behalf as a result of social pressures of this nature is shown in the following sentence: ‘He sired these children, and that is what a man is for. That he could not feed them was not his fault; he went to the war. They have a mother, don’t they?’ (193). This indicates the extent to which the Igbo society exempts men from their real duties, as family breadwinners, while putting the blame and burden on women. In this respect, political, economic and social factors work hand in hand, deterring a woman like Nnu Ego from achieving self-realization and individual empowerment. This state of affairs arises because women may take more responsibility for their families. In consequence, they

may suffer more than the men in their lives, in that they may experience great difficulty in caring for their families, and may have to labour hard to support them.

Another point to consider is that there are no communal support structures from which a woman such as Nnu Ego could have derived both material and emotional support. Traditionally this would have been the case in African societies such as her own. There is only a cash-based capitalist economy requiring individuals to sustain themselves. So, even when Nnu Ego is pregnant, she goes to look for cigarettes to sell, whilst the head of the house does nothing (99). In another instance when there is nothing to eat in the house, Nnaife shouts at Nnu Ego ‘[I]t’s your responsibility to feed your children as best as you can. Don’t worry about me. I shall take care of myself’, and he adds, ‘Sell your lappas. You are the chief wife: use your head’ (152). Here Nnaife completely forgoes his duties as a father, instructing Nnu Ego to strip herself of her dignity in order to support the family, leaving the economic support of the family in her hands. Since caring for a family emotionally and economically has become a woman’s responsibility, Nnaife warns Nnu Ego that if she does not care for her family, she could be regarded as having failed in her duty as mother. Even when Nnaife comes back from the war, he still neglects his duties as a father to the extent that Nnu Ego has to caution him about the way he spends the family’s money (204). Nnaife is only a man on the basis of his biological make-up, but he fails to fulfill his traditional duties, in that, as head of the household, he should have been principal breadwinner. However, in a colonized society of this nature, such traditional perceptions no longer carry weight, as is evident in Rodney’s description above.

On the other hand, it may be that Nnaife behaves in this way because he has been disempowered by colonialism or simply because he is weak and lazy. Some critics suggest that Emecheta’s depiction of Nnaife and other similar men is problematic, for the latter reason among much else. Nnu Ego dies a lonely death, whilst Nnaife enters shamefully into old age. According to Rodwell Makombe, a literary scholar, Emecheta fails to ‘historically contextualize her narrative’ that is to say ‘she ignores other factors that contribute to the oppression of women other than patriarchy’. He further argues that Emecheta

[m]akes no attempt to situate the disintegration of the African family within the colonial/postcolonial milieu, opting, however, to put all the blame on patriarchy.

Thus, the narrative stands out as an essentialist tirade that projects men as selfish architects of an oppressive ideology (2010: 1).

To further strengthen his argument, Makombe concurs with Palmer's assertion that Emecheta's portrayal of African men 'is exaggerated to the point of unrealism' (cited in Makombe, 2010:1). Therefore, in his view Emecheta's claim that she is not a feminist of the western tradition becomes unsubstantiated because Emecheta 'adopts the language and attitude of the colonizer by pointing out the ills of African culture, discarding Africans and African cultural practices as uncivilized' (13).

However, though Emecheta is very critical of many features of African tradition, particularly those that have damaging effects on women, she does depict harmful effects of colonialism, in that Nnu Ego and Nnaife's lives would have been easier if they had not been living in a colonized country. Possibly, too, Nnu Ego's relationship with her husband might have been less problematic in certain respects. Again, more support would have been available to Nnu Ego in traditional society and would not have suffered in the way that she does. Thus, Emecheta draws attention to the problematic features of westernization. Emecheta also describes how the harmful effects of western colonialism, in conjunction with problematic features of traditional practices, can damage relationships between African men and women, sometimes giving rise to callous, self-centered behavior on the part of some men.

Although Nnaife fails to provide for his immediate family, he nonetheless increases his family responsibilities by inheriting a wife of a dead brother. The insensitivity of certain men in this regard is shown through behaviour of this nature. Partly for the sake of culture and particularly because of an egocentric desire to accumulate more wives, Nnaife insists on making Adankwo his wife, thinking it will make him appear 'manly'. Moreover, we are told: 'Adankwo, that very composed woman, was taken in, and before long she too became pregnant, with her last menopausal baby' (206).

Again, the extent to which this society has no regard for women, even when they grow older, is highlighted. Adankwo, who is old enough to be Nnaife's mother, is at an age at which she should be spared from her duties as mother and could instead 'mother' her husband, but respect for her is violated and her own feelings are disregarded because she is a woman. This polygamous situation adds to Nnu Ego's emotional and economic burdens, as she is expected



to welcome this new woman into her little home. Moreover, Nnaife takes another wife at a time when they can hardly cope with their strained economic circumstances and he cannot provide for the family he already has.

Weighed down by various emotional, psychological and economic hardships, Nnu Ego pins her hopes on attaining a better life from her sons. She still thinks she cannot cope on her own, for she has been socialized into believing that women cannot survive as independent agents. Yet this is ironic because, although this entails much suffering, she is able to support herself and her family on her own. Despite this, she is constantly searching for support from men, and this gives her false hope which helps her to carry on through her struggles, but only up to a certain point, because these hopes fail her in the end. This also highlights the fact that she has been socialized into believing that sons will always provide for their parents once they grow up. Thus, we are told that 'Nnu Ego accepted her lot, taking comfort in the fact that one day her boys would be men' (180). This is also ironic because ultimately a belief of this nature does not transform her situation in any way. In *The Joys of Motherhood* women are undermined psychologically and emotionally by a range of factors, including the extent to which they look to men for significance in their lives.

As a result of the forms of oppression with which she is beset, Nnu Ego labours timelessly as she believes that a dutiful African mother should, but her hard work and sacrifices are not acknowledged, indicative of the way women's contributions are undermined in her society. Nnaife spends all his money celebrating his return and drinking wine with his friends. He fails to plan for his children's future and find decent accommodation for his family. Moreover, Nnaife shows extreme insensitivity by not consoling Nnu Ego for the time she had suffered alone. Instead, he humiliates her by finding another wife in the guise of providing a helping hand for Nnu Ego, which 'soon arrived in the shape of a sixteen-year-old girl named Okpo'(206). Nnaife acquires another wife particularly because the patriarchal nature of his society creates conditions conducive to self-centered behaviour of this kind. For instance, his thoughtless tendencies are comparable to Agbadi's selfish and unfeeling treatment of his wives in his polygamous marriage, as discussed earlier. Nnaife spends his compensation fee from the war on marrying this young girl, although that amount of money would have helped his family considerably, had he concentrated on them alone. All these forms of humiliation, neglect and oppression leave Nnu Ego and various other women like her in utter desperation,

making it harder for them to realize their potential. The extent to which they are able to attain this will be examined below.

### **Possibilities for Empowerment**

Having examined the forms of suffering experienced by women in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the possibilities of empowerment available for women in this novel will be discussed. First, however, we can consider an observation that was made by the former South African Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, who addressed a women's conference on economic empowerment in Durban on 7 August 2007:

Prescribed gender roles led to women's role in the domestic sphere, as mothers and nurturers, being seen as of lesser importance and value than the tasks of men. Women were said to be natural nurturers and domestic labourers while men were perceived to be natural leaders and decision-makers. These roles were reinforced at home, at school and through the media, thus restricting women's perceptions, disempowering their social and economic potential and limiting the possibilities for their future.

In the above passage, the Minister describes the position of women in South Africa after the political transition, describing traditional, stereotypical perceptions of women deriving from African tradition and longstanding gender stereotypes in western society. This shows the extent to which the path to women's empowerment is still filled with various obstacles. Even though in present-day South Africa there are some possibilities for affirmative action to correct gender imbalances in the workplace, and the constitution does affirm the importance of gender equality, some women still struggle.

If it is hard for these women, it is clearly worse for women depicted in *The Joys of Motherhood*, in a socio-political, economic and cultural context in which the possibilities of empowerment are almost unavailable. Nnu Ego is locked in a society in which social codes and conventions require her to suppress all her feelings and desires. She exists not for her own sake but for others, appears to embody the message that it is well-nigh impossible for women to attain self-realization and self-sufficiency. She feels so overwhelmed by her burdens that she mourns: 'God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? (210). This is indicative of the extent to which many women suffer in her society. Even if they carry out their socially prescribed

roles and produce children, they are expected to give them all they have, and to sacrifice their very lives to their children yet they may receive nothing in return. Also, women in the society in *The Joys of Motherhood* are confined to such an extent that Nnu Ego believes that she will never be free even when she is dead, because her spirit will always be blamed if there are misfortunes in the family. Nnu Ego is aware of how deeply oppressed, and how deprived of her personal freedom she is. She toils all her life trying to be the good woman that her society expects her to be, but this is never adequately acknowledged.

The dilemma is intensified for Nnu Ego because she is alone in a world in which everyone is busy with their own lives for '[n]o physical help came from friends, for they were all too busy making their own money, and she was always tied down at home with Nnamdio and the twins'(180). This lucidly illustrates the plight of a woman in Lagos deprived not only of basic commodities but also of human support. Nnu Ego's sufferings are intensified when she visits her family in Ibuza. By the time she returns after nine months, everything has become far more expensive and she feels defeated when she sees her co-wife dressed elegantly. Thus, she laments: '[W]hereas you chose money and nice clothes, I have chosen my children; but you must remember that wealth has always been in my family. I am poor only in Lagos. Go to Ibuza and see how rich I am in people – friends, relatives, in-laws' (179). This is a desperate and pitiful attempt to acquire some standing in her household, while building some sense of self-esteem. It is tragic that when she returns to Ibuza where she claims to be 'rich in friends and relatives', she succumbs to a lonely death with no one to hold her hand. This is because she has not freed herself from the male figures in her life: her husband, her father and her sons.

The frustration that mounts up within her makes her realize that she has forgotten to live her life to the full. Though she realizes this, the awareness does not contribute to her emancipation, because she remains trapped. This is because she cannot bring herself to imagine that there could be any happiness available outside conforming to a woman's socially stipulated roles as mother and wife. Therefore she chooses security instead of self. This phrase is used by Maiguru in *Nervous Conditions* and the implications of this will be discussed more fully in the next chapter. In choosing security, Nnu Ego decides to derive comfort and meaning in life primarily from her identity as a mother. Although there is no harm in deriving reassurance and sense of security from being a mother, her problem is that

her whole life and her sense of identity revolves around being a mother. As a result, she is unable to set herself free from the shackles of patriarchy and become an independent individual. The extent to which she derives her principal sense of purpose and significance in life from being a mother is exasperating and bewildering, in that it causes her to behave in an extreme, even irrational manner. For instance, she almost loses her life trying to be a strong woman during childbirth, reflecting:

[H]ow would she, almost an old woman, go round the yard asking for help just because she was having her ninth baby? That will be ridiculous. Soon her eldest twin daughters would be betrothed, and they would remember that their mother was a coward in childbirth (218).

Here, she denies herself any possible chances of self-expression, hesitating even to ask for help at a time when she needs it most, suppressing the pains of labour in order to be called a good woman. She feels she should suppress her physical and emotional pain and this is indicative of the extent to which women are reduced to childbearing machines in this society. At this stage, she states that her joy is in *the knowledge* of being a mother when her baby dies just after birth, saying:

I am sorry you are not staying; I am also glad that God has seen fit to take you back. My own reward, the joy of *knowing* that at this age I can still have children for my husband. The joy of making the world *know* that while some of our friends and their wives are at this moment making sacrifices so that they may have children, I can have one without any effort at all (218-219).

The pressure placed on women to please male authorities in their lives reduces their chances for self-realization. Emecheta maintains that holding on to regressive ideologies, such as the ones to which Nnu Ego clings, does not contribute at all to women's empowerment. Accordingly, she declares:

I write about women who try very hard to hold their family together until it becomes absolutely impossible. I have no sympathy for a woman who deserts her children; neither do I have sympathy for a woman who insists on staying in a marriage with a brute of man, simply to be respectable (2007: 553).

While Emecheta endorses positive relationships between men and women in her critical writing, she does emphasize that a woman should not stay in an unhappy marriage and she depicts the consequences of doing so her novel. Accordingly, she is unsparingly 'ruthless' in

her treatment of Nnu Ego, as critics such as Makombe (2010: 1) have claimed, inflicting intense suffering and hardships upon her as a way of emphasizing that there is no point for women to strive against all odds, to be 'respectable.' Through the figure of Nnu Ego, Emecheta depicts that this gives rise to great suffering more often than not. Nnu Ego contrasts with Adah, in *Second Class Citizen*, who leaves her lazy abusive husband, Francis, and starts her life afresh with her children, demonstrating that she is an independent individual who does not need a man to make her whole. Nnu Ego, on the other hand, stays in a marriage in which love never existed and clings to an abusive Nnaife because she is afraid of what people would think of her. Despite all the neglect and abuse that her husband inflicts on her, she wants to be a respectable woman and cannot imagine disgracing her father, who is a chief. Her life is continually controlled by men: her husband, her sons and her father, and much of her suffering in life stems from this. Even in death, her father still controls her life, since she still takes it upon herself never to disgrace her father, and this makes it difficult for her to perceive the changing world around her.

On the other hand, Emecheta supports women like Adaku, Nnu Ego's co-wife, who are able to break their fetters, leave an oppressive marriage, and try to live their own lives. Furthermore, Adaku provides one example of women's capacity to empower themselves by leading independent lives. She fends for herself and supports her children by using her body. Adaku intends to be a prostitute in order to give a decent life and education to her daughters so that they are not married off at an early age. She also rejects certain oppressive aspects of African tradition in her society that control a woman, even her personal god, when she says: 'My *chi* be damned! I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my *chi*!' (188). This shows the extent to which she refuses to be subjugated, by obeying the will of gods that she does not recognize because they further the interests of a patriarchal culture. Adaku's rejection of certain oppressive aspects of African tradition in her society runs counter to some womanist perspectives, such as those endorsed by Ogunyemi, who maintains that 'black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots and the ideals of black life' (72). Adaku chooses to reject some of these so that she can be free. Thus, Emecheta draws attention to the fact that not all roots of African life are necessarily positive and she highlights some of the problematic features in her work. But she also emphasizes the fact that western society is not necessarily a better alternative, as it has its damaging aspects such as colonialism.

Adaku's decision to become a prostitute highlights the economic desperation experienced by various women in Igbo society, and the limited options available to them at this time. Despite this, however, Adaku further empowers herself by stating that she will not aspire to goals that are too impractical for her to achieve, saying: '[T]he more I think about it the more I realize that we women set impossible standards for ourselves. That we make life intolerable for one another. I cannot live up to your standards, senior wife. So I have to set my own' (189). Thus, Adaku refuses to be bound by oppressive social tenets to which Nnu Ego clings.

Ego wishes she could do the same, but fears what would be said about her if she acted in this way. Her fear of social disapproval is the most significant way in which Nnu Ego relinquishes all possibilities of empowerment. In contrast to Nnu Ego, Adaku shows that she is in touch with the changes taking place in her society, as she says:

Everybody accuses me of making money all the time. What else is there for me to do? I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in future. Many rich Yoruba families send their daughters to school these days; I shall do the same with mine. Nnaife is not going to send them away to any husband before they are ready. I will see to that! (188).

Adaku becomes the first woman in the novel to embrace the emancipation of the girl child and does not pass subservience onto her children. Thus, as is evident above, she is a new kind of mother who seeks to break free from the longstanding pattern of patriarchal oppression and does not wish to impose it on her daughters. She displays determination, vowing that Nnaife will not 'send' her daughters away into marriage before they are ready. To crown it all, she also displays the capacity to take her life into her own hands as she says 'I will see to that'. On the other hand, Nnu Ego thinks female independence is unheard of, so she just shows her daughters downtrodden, subservient female conduct, without making them aware of the possibilities of emancipation from male control.

Despite this, Nnu Ego wants to believe her daughter's lives can be different and she believes that they can be strong and experience the possibilities and freedoms that she herself could not attain. For instance, this is evident in the names that she bestows on them. She names one Obiageli, meaning 'she who has come to enjoy wealth'. This suggests that even though she herself has not enjoyed wealth, both literally and figuratively, she believes her daughter can.

She also names another daughter Malachi, meaning ‘you do not know what tomorrow will bring’, which indicates that she trusts that the future will be different for her daughter, in contrast to her own wretched, confined existence.

While all Nnu Ego can do is seek comfort in the fact that she has been a successful mother in terms of bearing a number of children, Adaku looks into the future and sees that there is more to a woman’s life than being married off at an early age and being controlled by men. She goes on to declare that she is not ‘[n]ot prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons’ (188). She refuses to let men continue to exercise dominion over her, vehemently refusing to allow her life to be controlled by her inability to bear sons. This is in contrast to Nnu Ego, who feels that her life is devoid of all meaning when her son dies. Her desire to commit suicide is indicative of the depth of her psychological disturbance and the extent to which her life revolves around her ability to bear children, especially sons.

However, in their different ways, the decisions that Adaku and Nnu Ego take concerning their lives show the desperation of Emecheta’s women and the fact that there is a limited vision of hope in her novel, especially if we consider the fact that Adaku has to resort to working as a prostitute. All in all, the limited possibilities for women in Emecheta’s novel is indicative of the extent of her departure from the womanist vision, which calls for sound relationships between men and women and which also offers possibilities for wholeness, healing and harmony. More often than not, these are not possible in *The Joys of Motherhood*. However, Emecheta does offer us one example of this. Nnu Ego’s daughter, Kehinde, indicates that it is possible for women to have constructive relationships with men. She also attains a sense of individual selfhood when she defies her father’s authority, and marries the man she loves from another tribe.

To a certain extent, Emecheta advocates good relationships between men and women, because they have the potential to strengthen each other, as is the case in Kehinde’s life. Despite this one example, Emecheta strives to highlight the fact that in some societies as this one, in which women are affected by political and socio-economic factors, a womanist perspective would not be sustainable for the society at large. In part, this is because a womanist perspective does not take economic issues sufficiently into account. Moreover, as

*The Joys of Motherhood* and many of Emecheta's other novels suggest, it is clear that she feels that womanism too idealistic and visionary to be applicable to the harsh realities of African women's lives. Nonetheless, there is also a significant contrast between Emecheta's theoretical writing in which she endorses some aspects of womanism and her fiction, in which womanism is not feasible. For instance, Emecheta's embrace of African traditions such as polygamy in her critical writing arises from her unwillingness to be viewed as an African woman writer who has rejected her culture and traditions and endorses white Anglo-American feminism. However, she expresses a more deep-seated resistance to traditions such as polygamy in her novels. This is because fiction allows one to venture more deeply into the messy world of human relationships and explore shortcomings and ambiguities in the individual psyche.

In closing, one issue is worth further consideration. Emecheta does confirm that in the novel she describes a woman who becomes so obsessed with being a good mother and wife that she does not cultivate her women friends (2007: 555). Nnu Ego's obsession makes her live in isolation, removed from her home and friends. It is also possible that the threats posed by polygamy makes her fear that she will be supplanted by another wife, tending to make her view other women as potential rivals, rather than potential sources of support. In this respect, she further reduces her own possibilities of empowerment. [H]ooks emphasizes the importance of bonds between women as she states that 'women are enriched when we bond with one another' (45). However, she goes on to say '[B]ut we cannot develop sustaining ties or political solidarity using the model of Sisterhood created by bourgeois women's liberation' (45). Thus, she contends that bonds of this nature are not feasible because women's experiences are varied. One reason why Nnu Ego succumbs to a lonely death is because she and other women around her are divided from one another. This bears out hooks's observation that there some issues that need to be dealt with first before women can join hands. Further to this, hooks points out that 'women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices. Sustained bonding between women can only occur when these divisions are confronted and the necessary steps taken to eliminate them' (44).

There are hierarchical distinctions of various kinds within this society, giving rise to divisions such as these. For instance, Nnu Ego views herself as a relatively fortunate woman because



she had been able to bear a number of children, unlike many other women who did not have children at all. As a result, she places herself in a different category. She spent all her energy on one thing she considered important, so 'she had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building her joys of motherhood (253). The hierarchical distinctions of this kind, along with the institution of polygamy prevent Nnu Ego from bonding with other women. As has already become evident, polygamy fosters divisions between women, as they vie with one another for one man's affection. Also, because her entire life is so dominated by men, she is unable to look beyond the constraints of the patriarchal order to which she submits and turn to other women for sources of strength and support.

Having discussed the issues that affect women in a society of this nature, in which they try to achieve a sense of self-actualization and self-worth and freedom from their identities as mothers, the next chapter will examine the way in which daughters in another society in Africa, with certain striking points of contrast and comparison with Igbo society, are also faced with challenges in their bid to attain empowerment.

### CHAPTER THREE

The aim of this chapter is to explore the ways in which Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* examines the damages that can be caused by gender oppression in Shona patriarchal society and the way some women manage to liberate themselves from this. On account of the extent to which the novel focuses on forms of sexist oppression afflicting certain black women, it can be analyzed in terms of African and African-American feminism. [H]ooks asserts that 'feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression'. She goes on to describe 'the resistance to unjust, authoritarian forms of control and domination as a key feature of feminism' (26). Further to this, Boyce Davies states that African feminism 'challenges [men] to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation, which differ from the generalized oppression of all African people' (9). Another feature of African-American feminism is worth bearing in mind, for hooks also asserts that:

black women as well as other groups of women who live daily in oppressive situations, often acquire an awareness of patriarchal politics from their lived experience, just as they develop strategies of resistance (even though they may not resist on a sustained or organized basis) (10).

As we will see in this chapter, many of the characters in *Nervous Conditions* are aware of the oppressive 'patriarchal politics' in the society in which they live, but only a few manage to evolve successful 'strategies of resistance'.

The novel is set in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Zimbabwean pre-independence era, and it deals especially with the interconnected race, class and gender oppression that comes to the fore in this and many other African societies and the way in which this affects the lives of various women. [H]ooks comments on the significance of a focus of this nature: '[P]rivileged feminists have largely been unable to speak to, with, and for diverse groups of women because they either do not understand fully the inter-relatedness of sex, race, and class oppression or refuse to take this inter-relatedness seriously'(14). Moreover, Dangarembga is an African woman with insight into experiences of women in pre-independence Zimbabwe and thus unlike the Anglo-American feminists to whom hooks alludes, she is able to speak to and on behalf of the women in her novel. The story is presented from Tambu's point of view, offering us insights into the mind of a young person growing up in a society in which various forms of gender oppression are already at work, aggravated by the economic, socio-political

and cultural pressures of colonialism experienced by African people in pre-independence Zimbabwe.

The novel investigates the lives of two young women, Tambudzai (Tambu) and Nyasha, as they struggle against the obstacles of a colonial, patriarchal society. Thus the primary focus of this chapter is on daughters, and thereafter on wives and mothers; whereas the previous two chapters have investigated the lives of women as wives and mothers in particular. *Nervous Conditions* is a *bildungsroman*, depicting a young person's journey to maturity. Tambu's personal journey towards self-actualization will be viewed in the light of the key concerns of this study: gender oppression and possibilities of empowerment.

Tambu, the central protagonist, is a young woman trying to overcome the hardships of her situation and develop her capacities to the fullest. As a woman she is undermined and deemed inferior by the men around her and also by the representatives of the colonial system, but despite this she is able to develop inner strength and self-awareness, empowering herself in the process. She is also aware that only certain women around her are able to accomplish self-actualization of this kind, whilst others are not. This chapter will therefore cast light on the ways the women in this society are oppressed and the extent to which some of them are able to acquire empowerment, and the reasons why others are not. The issues to be discussed here include an investigation of the place of the female child in traditional Zimbabwean society; women under patriarchal control; women's struggles to make their voices heard; and the ways in which entrenched gender values, combined with the effects of colonialism and economic oppression, result in triple oppression for women. Finally, the chapter will consider the extent to which possibilities of empowerment are available to the women in the novel. The chapter also discusses the relationships between women and investigates not only the extent to which they contribute to one another's oppression, but also the ways in which they sustain and support each other.

Before examining the various forms of oppression with which women in this novel are beset, an overview of the novel as a whole will be offered and its key concerns will be highlighted. The novel depicts Tambu's experiences as she describes her escape from patriarchal oppression, poverty and also her growth to maturity and self-realization. While various features of feminism cast light on key concerns of the book, it also needs to be examined in

terms of aspects of womanism. For instance, Tambu's growth to self-awareness can be related to womanist concerns. Ogunyemi makes an observation that has bearing on this aspect of the novel: 'The black woman is not as powerless in the black world as the white woman is in the white world; the black woman, less protected than her white counterpart, has to grow independent' (73). Tambu is in a position of this nature, so she has to develop her own inner resources, such as independent and self-reliance.

*Nervous Conditions* relates to aspects of womanism in other respects, in that Tambu is daring and determined. She boldly challenges some restrictive norms and forms of authority that threaten her personal development and growth to self-awareness. For a woman to be able to acquire self-awareness in a society such as Tambu's, she has to be resolute and courageous. Similarly, in *The Color Purple*, Celie is able to challenge societal expectations in a bold, confident manner and leads her life in a way that makes her happy. Walker maintains that womanism, 'usually refers to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behaviour' (2005: xi). We will see that Tambu's aunt Lucia also displays this. Walker goes on to contend that womanist behaviour of this kind involves '[w]anting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one' (2005: xi). This is evident in Tambu's desire for an education, and in her lively inquiring mind. In order for Tambu to acquire this ability to attain knowledge of her society, others and herself, she has to battle with the obstacles of interconnected race, class and gender oppression. For instance, when Tambu is nearly denied the opportunity to be educated on account of her family's poverty, which stems from the effects of colonialism and her gender, she tries to fight the obstacles that might prevent her from acquiring an education. For instance, Tambu is determined to earn her own money for school fees, so she grows some maize, selling it and earning enough money to continue her education. This is indicative of her strength of character and her independence of spirit, even at an early age. Her behavior is in keeping with her name Tambudzai, 'trouble maker'. The meaning of her name influences the way she responds to the situation in which she finds herself. This means that sometimes she disturbs and disrupts those around her because she does not always conform to their notions of female obedience and submissiveness. She struggles against that which threatens her development and could prevent her from becoming a free woman.

By overcoming obstacles such as these, she is able to attain self-actualization. Accordingly, she states: '[M]y story is ... about my escape and Lucia's'(1). The novel thus foregrounds the issue of entrapment versus escape, in that some characters manage to free themselves from oppressive systems of patriarchal and colonial control, such as Tambu and her aunt Lucia, and strive for a sense of independent selfhood, whilst others remain trapped, such as Maiguru, Tambu's maternal aunt, Mainini, Tambu's mother and Nyasha, Maiguru's daughter and Tambu's cousin, who tries to rebel, but ultimately remains trapped. Nyasha is caught between two cultures, the Shona and the British; while Tambu remains rooted in Shona culture, while drawing that which will be of use to her from the colonial British culture, such as education. The fact that Nyasha does not belong to either culture makes it difficult for her to speak out effectively. Nyasha is able to express her views and feelings, but the society in which she lives does not tolerate it, and thus her voice is not heard. Spivak makes a comment that concurs with Nyasha's situation: '[H]ere is a woman who tried to be decisive in extremis. She 'spoke', but women did not, do not, 'hear' her. Thus she can be defined as a "subaltern" –a person without lines of social mobility' (28). Nyasha is unable to break free from constraints of her situation because, unlike Tambu, she lacks a solid foundation on which to base her resistance.

On the other hand there are women who manage to liberate themselves in various ways. Although Tambu's escape is the primary focus of the text, her aunt Lucia's escape is also significant, as Lucia manages to break free from patriarchal systems of control and embarks on an independent life, though she is still beholden to Tambu's uncle, Babamukuru, to a certain extent. The chapter will also compare and contrast Tambu's and Nyasha's journeys towards personal freedom and self-realization, exploring the reasons why Tambu achieves these while Nyasha does not.

Education plays a vital role in each of the character's lives and it casts light on interconnected issues of race, class and gender, showing that education is a form of power and control used by many, both the colonial authorities and the males in Shona culture. Tambu becomes aware of the questionable aspects of the education she receives as time goes by. Its limitations are highlighted as we see the damage it has done to Babamukuru and his family. Moreover, Nyasha repeatedly draws Tambu's and our attention to the problematic features of colonial education. But nonetheless Tambu needs education in order to escape the poverty of her

surroundings and advance herself in life. Despite the problematic nature of education, those who lack it are beset with poverty, particularly characters such as Jeremiah, Takesure and Mainini. The hardships they experience stem in part from their lack of education, but also significantly from the economic and material deprivation caused by colonialism, which results in reduced economic possibilities and disempowerment and dependency. This generates not only physical hardship but also psychological disturbances, the 'nervous condition' to which the title of the book alludes. Tambu's growth to independence and maturity is characterized in part by her ability to evaluate the education she receives more critically, and also by the way in which she begins to question her uncle who is providing her with a good education. At first Tambu regards her uncle with great deal of respect, but as time goes by she begins is able to see that Babamukuru endorses forms of gender oppression and sex-role stereotyping and submits too readily to the will of colonial authorities. Acknowledging this and being able to challenge Babamukuru becomes an important stage in her personal development.

Dangarembga not only depicts Tambu's journey towards personal empowerment and self-realization, in the face of considerable odds, but she also shows us the struggles of diverse African women in pre-independence Zimbabwe. Their struggles are similar in some respects, as all the women, regardless of class, have to contend with the oppressive and authoritarian nature of patriarchy and colonial forms of authority. However, this also gives rise to some key differences, in that educated women do not have to carry the double burden of gender and class, which Tambu's mother, Mainini, describes, as cited at the outset of this study.

Before examining the novel more closely, it is also significant to note that it can be analyzed in terms of specific black feminist trends that seek to challenge certain African men's lack of understanding of the position of women in the societies in which they live. For instance, Dabi Nkululeko emphasizes the need to take cognizance of two central concerns in black feminism. She argues that 'the black women should determine their own liberation and not remain organized within the male dominated sections of the society' (1987: 91, 104). This can be related to *Nervous Conditions*, in that Dangarembga makes us aware of the strategies African women can develop to challenge limited, patriarchal notions of their place in society. In *Nervous Conditions*, we also see that Tambu 'determines [her] own liberation' by developing ways of empowering herself, as does her bold, independent aunt Lucia. Hendricks

and Lewis concur with Nkululeko's conviction, observing that: 'black feminism reflects [black] women's reactions to male dominance in racial struggles' (66). In the novel, we see how women struggle with patriarchal control in colonial times and describe that which confines them as black women. In these and other respects, *Nervous Conditions* can be viewed as expressive of black feminist concerns, which display 'an awareness of black women's position in society' (Nkululeko: 104). This is examined, for instance, in the way the novel explores Tambu's own position in her society, and those of various other Shona women from diverse backgrounds. In this way, the novel interrogates the nature of the society in which Tambu and other women live, drawing attention to some of its problematic features. Boyce Davies expands on this, stating 'women writers are not simply seeing themselves in conflict with traditionalism but are pointing out to society where some of the inequities lie and thereby are directly involved in a struggle to reshape society' (13). All in all, according to Hendricks and Lewis, black feminism is a theory that provides 'a basis for expressivism, consciousness-raising and a general form of emotional and psychological empowerment' (66). Tambu, Nyasha and Lucia can be regarded as 'black feminists' in certain respects as they draw attention to the ways in which women like them are disempowered and seek ways of expressing themselves fully and freely.

Shirley Jeane Broekman suggests that Dangarembga's novel disputes claims such as Katherine Frank and Marie Umeh's assertion that it is difficult for African women to go 'beyond their status as victims because of their location in oppressive social systems' (1999:13). Frank and Umeh have this to say:

In order to be free and fulfilled as a woman [the African woman] must renounce her African identity because of the inherent sexism of traditional African culture. Or, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her 'Africanness', she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self-determination (cited in Stratton: 110).

However, Broekman suggests that despite the fact that they retain their strong sense of their identities as African women, 'some female characters are able to influence and alter their position and achieve varying degrees of personal liberation' (13). In fact, Tambu attains personal liberation without renouncing her African identity and her culture, because it is a key part of her sense of being, assisting her in her journey towards individual selfhood and empowerment. Thus, she is also able to recognize and critique the problematic aspects of her culture without rejecting it as a whole.

Thus, Dangarembga's text can also be situated within black feminism in that it affirms the importance of one's culture, whilst demonstrating that women suffer under patriarchal authority. [H]ooks comments on her own experience, which has some bearing on the latter part of this: '[M]y awareness of feminist struggle was stimulated by social circumstances. Anger led me to question the politics of male dominance and enabled me to resist sexist socialization' (10). Comparably, Tambu is made aware of gender oppression as a result of her social circumstances, in part because this is imposed on the women around her, and also as a result of her first-hand experiences of the oppression that is inflicted upon her.

Since Tambu's society is a colonial one, colonialism also contributes to the forms of oppression that she and other women experience. We see Tambu's growing awareness of this when she resists both patriarchal and colonial control by objecting to Babamukuru's desire to please the colonial authorities by making her parents have a western-style white wedding. This incites her to challenge Babamukuru and to question other forms of patriarchal and colonial authority from whence he derives his power. Thus, patriarchal dominance is upheld and intensified by the colonial system, in which 'colonial and patriarchal oppression subtly interlock and reinforce each other' (Broekman: 14). Various other critics, Pauline Ada Uwakweh included, concur with this. Moreover, economic factors generated by colonialism come into play here, exacerbating black women's oppression, as Mainini laments: '[A]nd these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa!' (16).

Through her depiction of Tambu's family's situation, Dangarembga highlights the major contrasts, divisions and imbalances arising from economic oppression. This is interconnected with the way people are subjugated as a result of their race and gender. Further to this, by depicting the various ways in which specific patriarchal systems oppress different women, Dangarembga's novel exposes the problematic aspects of traditional Anglo-American feminism, which states that women are oppressed in similar ways universally. [H]ooks draws attention to this observing:

[B]ourgeois white women interested in women's rights issues have been satisfied with simple definitions for obvious reasons. Rhetorically placing themselves in the same



social category as oppressed women, they were not anxious to call attention to race and class privilege (18).

As we see race and class issues significantly affect the different ways in which women suffer in *Nervous Conditions*.

The womanist dimensions of Dangarembga's work are worth considering further at this point, as a result of its sympathetic depiction of some the pressures under which its principal male protagonist, Babamukuru, is placed. This stems from the way he is torn between two cultures, Shona and British, both of which he seeks to comply with. This bears out Ogunyemi's observation, '[W]hat, after all, is the value of sexual equality in a ghetto? Black women are disadvantaged in several ways: as blacks they, *with their men*, are victims of a white patriarchal culture' (68). She asserts that, because men are also oppressed by race, there is need for a sense of solidarity between black men and women. Dangarembga displays some sympathetic insight into Babamukuru's plight as she describes dilemmas that confront him. As an African man in a colonial society, Babamukuru feels obliged to submit to pressures from the white colonial authorities, fearing he will lose his privileged position if he does not do so.

The issue of identity constitutes one of Dangarembga's principal concerns in *Nervous Conditions*, along with the striving for a sense of selfhood and self-awareness upon which womanism focus. On the other hand, the search for identity can be related to postcolonial theory, which is concerned with the issue of identity, and also to womanism in certain respects. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin make an observation that highlights some key issues in the novel, maintaining that while a stable culture helps one attain self-actualization, there are many factors that cause a person to suffer from a cultural crisis that can impede identity formulation. A number of these reasons stem from the process of colonization:

A valid and active sense of self many have been eroded by dislocation, resulting from migration, the experience of enslavement, transportation, or 'voluntary' removal for indentured labour. Or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration of the conscious and unconscious oppression of the indigenous personality and culture by a supposedly superior racial or cultural model (1989: 9).

The above statement can be related to Tambu, Babamukuru and Nyasha in various respects. Through varying degrees of separation from their roots and culture and exposure to new ways of life shaped by colonialism, they are made aware of how they and their people are viewed as inferior. This has the potential to undermine each protagonist's sense of self. According to post-colonial theorists, the colonizer is known for erasing the authentic identity of the colonized and imposing his or her own. As Frantz Fanon observes: '[H]is customs and the sources on which they are based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him' (1967: 110). Dangarembga draws attention to the way in which colonized peoples' sense of identity is affected by this. For example, Babamukuru and Nyasha are caught between two cultures and because they cannot identify fully with either of the two, they struggle to establish a sense of their own identities.

As a result of these and other circumstances, Nyasha and Babamukuru and certain other characters in the text are hybrids in various respects, as a result of the way they draw on and are shaped by these two cultures. Although Tambu and some other characters are also hybrids to a certain extent, they manage to strike a balance between their cultures and that of the colonizers so that their authentic identities are not obliterated. They retain a strong sense of who they are, as African people. They draw on certain aspects of colonialism that may prove constructive, such as western education in Tambu's case, while critiquing other aspects that they perceive to be harmful, remaining rooted in their own culture. Cultural hybrids are known for taking what they deem necessary from each culture and leaving that which is detrimental, thus resulting in positive hybridity in Tambu's case, and negative hybridity which results when one borrows too much from one culture and tries to deny the existence of the other culture, as in the cases of Nyasha, Nhamo, Chido and Babamukuru. To a certain extent, characters such as Nyasha and Babamukuru fail to negotiate the space available to them, which Homi Bhabha depicts as the 'interstitial space or third space' (1994: 156) located between two cultures; whereas Tambu succeeds in accessing this, for the reasons that have been discussed above.

A character like Babamukuru exhibits negative hybridity, in that he thinks that an authentic culture can be resuscitated, yet does not want to resurrect all of his culture but only those elements which he feels are in his interests, including patriarchy and those features of his

culture that will not run counter to the will of colonial authorities. Thus Babamukuru puts pressure on his daughter, Nyasha to retain some aspects of her traditional culture, by becoming a submissive, obedient daughter, relinquishing the independent, critical qualities she has acquired as a result of outside influences, such as the western-style education he has granted her. Ironically, western education enables her to challenge various forms of authority, including that of her father, which results in their constant clashes. Accordingly, this suggests that it is not possible to return completely to one's original culture, because it is dynamic. The Shona culture in *Nervous Conditions* has changed because it now exists within the context of colonialism and is thus undermined in various ways, and also subjected to outside influences. This means that certain cultural norms and practices have been stripped of their meaning, or have altered in some significant respects. For instance, culturally based forms of authority no longer possess all the power they once had.

For these reasons, it is difficult for Babamukuru to maintain a position of unquestionable authority in his family circle, because he has to submit to the colonial authorities. His family is aware of this, while he becomes an excessively authoritarian patriarchal figure in his household. He feels disempowered, partly because he feels duty bound to raise 'good' obedient children to please the colonial authorities. Consequently, he and other cultural hybrids like him fail to negotiate the 'interstitial spaces' successfully. Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter observes that 'to ignore western influence and look for some 'authentic' originary pre-colonial "African" identity, and try to negate the horrors of colonization, however, is naive and unrealistic, and equally reductive' (1). Aegerter points to the fact that it is impossible for a character like Nyasha to try and reconnect to an 'original identity' (1) because it has been destroyed for her by colonization, from which she has learnt new ways.

All in all then, the position of colonized people is difficult because the process of colonization undermines their sense of psychological wholeness and belonging. Fanon describes the forms of oppression they experience as 'nervous condition'. His statement that 'the condition of the native is a nervous condition' is quoted in the novel's epigraph. Here, Fanon makes reference to the effects of racial and colonial oppression, which may result in emotional and psychological disorders in the oppressed. During her illness caused by this situation, Nyasha alludes to the way in which colonialism has fragmented her sense of psychological wholeness, saying: 'I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you' (201).

The novel shows that many of the African characters in the novel are battling to be free from a certain ‘nervous condition’, that is the psychological and emotional damage caused by colonialism, and the colonial discourse in terms of which the colonized is depicted as the ‘other’. The ‘nervous condition’ vary from one person to the other, but one condition that is common to all is the condition of being ‘native’ (that is, colonized). Thus, Dangarembga derives the title of her novel from Fanon, who states that the concept of the ‘native’ or ‘other’ never existed before colonialism, arguing that the ‘native’ was a creation of the colonizers, and throughout the text, Dangarembga’s novel bears this out (Fanon, 1961). Moreover, Fanon dismisses the colonial notion that colonized people can not suffer from physic ailments. For instance, Tambu recalls that, ‘the psychiatrist said that Nyasha could not be ill, that Africans did not suffer in the way we had described’ (201). This illustrates the narrow, stereotypical nature of colonial perceptions arising from the process of ‘othering’. In part, the colonizers justified perceptions and behavior of this nature on the grounds that colonized people were not capable of the same depth of feeling as colonizers and lacked their psychological complexity. As a result, the colonized were regarded as incapable of emotional and psychological trauma, and many of the damaging, destructive effects of colonialism were exonerated for these reasons.

Having outlined some principal concerns of *Nervous Conditions*, the text will now be analysed in the light of the key concerns of gender oppression and possibilities of empowerment, discussing the ways in which women are oppressed as wives and mothers, but paying particular attention to how they are oppressed as daughters. As indicated above, this text focuses primarily on one daughter’s journey to self-realisation, and another’s failure to accomplish this. The way in which the position of the girl child in Shona society is influenced by colonialism and economic factors will also be borne in mind. All in all, this next section will examine the extent to which the girl child is viewed as a potentially useful asset, yet also as inferior in many significant respects.

### **Daughters: Trash or Treasure**

This section title has been adapted from a South African television programme screened on March 2010 on SABC 2, in which high school children in South Africa were asked to give their views on the status of the female child in the South African society. This is indicative of

the interest in this issue, in South Africa and diverse parts of the African continent. In South Africa and many other parts of the continent, the girl child is still undermined in certain respects, while the boy child still has many advantages in comparison. This tendency is reflected in various works of literature such as *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009), *Second Class Citizen* (1974), both by Nigerian writers, and it has also been discussed in recent research. For instance, Kristin Paltza discusses how, in Zanzibar's predominantly Islamic patriarchal society, only a few women and girls have access to education (*Mail and Guardian*: February 2011: 23). Moreover, in other parts of East Africa, recent research by Ugandan academic Chacha Nyaigotti-Chacha reveals that the girl child is still at a disadvantage in acquiring education mainly because of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programmes. This situation forces parents to send only their male children to school. As the report states: 'Because of the harsh economic conditions resulting from implementing the SAP's, gender imbalance in educational institutions has been exacerbated' (2004: 97). Tambu is aware of how education can assist in her journey towards self-realization, but initially she struggles to obtain education, on account of her gender. Before his death, her brother, Nhamo, is sent to school, but Tambu's parents are poor and rely on Babamukuru for economic support. Therefore at that time there is no money for Tambu's education, not only on account of her family's poverty, but also because in a patriarchal society, education of sons is prioritized.

*Nervous Conditions* is a significant text in this respect, in that it depicts some of the cultural practices which need to be revised in order for the girl child to be valued in the same way as the male child. Girls are only considered to be important if they serve in the interests of the patriarchal societies in which they are brought up. Throughout *Nervous Conditions*, as in *The Joys of Motherhood*, it is apparent that the way a girl child is brought up influences the way she will behave and be treated by men (both as a wife and a mother). This means that certain types of upbringing tend to disempower young girls. For example, Tambu's sister, Netsai, is disempowered to such an extent that her intellectual horizons often tend to be limited and her life is geared towards the service of men. Moreover, young men who see girls being brought up in this way will be influenced to illtreat their wives, daughters and sisters, as is evident in Tambu's brother's behaviour.

The relationship between Tambu and her brother, Nhamo, highlights the way the female child is regarded as inferior. Nhamo makes it his mission to unnecessarily emphasize his maleness and his importance. This is illustrated in one of the many things that makes Tambu detest her brother. She says that ‘knowing that he did not need help, that he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power, the authority to make us do things for him, I hated fetching my brother’s luggage’(10). This compels Tambu to make it her priority to establish her identity as a significant person in her own right, not as someone who can be treated as ‘trash’. What highlights Tambu’s inferiority, as distinct from Nhamo’s treasured position, is that Nhamo avoids some of the tasks at the homestead, such as harvesting which he finds demanding. He claims that he is busy with his studies, so that often Tambu and her mother have to carry out the work on their own (6). Tambu takes note of this saying: ‘Perhaps I am making it seem as though Nhamo simply decided to be obnoxious and turned out to be good at it, when in reality that was not the case; when in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner’ (12). In addition, Nhamo enjoys sitting around drinking very sweet tea, the tea that his aunt had intended as a gift for his mother, reading books, while other members of his family are working. Instead of reprimanding him for his laziness, Mainini praises him, saying that he will become a fine teacher one day (9), thus reinforcing his belief in his own importance.

As is evident in the fact that Nhamo feels he is entitled to order his sisters to fetch his luggage, he simply takes advantage of his status as a male. Thus, he has many advantages over his sisters. As is evident in her above-cited observation, Tambu realizes that Nhamo’s inconsiderate behavior is on account of his maleness and that arrogant male behaviour of this nature has become socially acceptable because it is perceived as an expression of male authority.

In *Nervous Conditions*, as in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the boy child is always prioritized, in death as well as in life. The depth of distress mothers undergo when they lose their male children is indicative of this. For instance, Tambu’s mother refuses to be comforted by Maiguru after Nhamo’s death, accusing her of bewitching her son (54). When the money for school fees is not enough, it is Tambu who has to leave school in order to enable Nhamo to continue with his education. Tambu’s situation makes her unhappy with her brother and she

confesses that the needs of the women in her family were not considered, which resulted in a delay in her education (12).

This situation draws our attention to the contrasting positions of male and female children in Shona society. Tambu is held back in order to further her brother's interests. In part, various women are denied an education as a result of the economic and racial oppression stemming from colonialism, worsening their position in the society. Moreover, the fact that the needs, desires and feelings of women were never considered, and 'not even legitimate', is further indication of the extent to which the female child is denigrated. Nhamo reminds Tambu of who he is when he says: [B]abamukuru wants a clever person, somebody who deserves the chance. That's why he wants me. He knows I've been doing very well at school. Who else is there for him to take? (47). Here, as on many other occasions, Nhamo emphasizes his status as a special male child and because he is made aware of how highly valued he is, so he feels he can tell lies with impunity. He lies when he says no one else in his family deserves an education, despite the fact that Tambu has performed better at school than he has.

In the above-cited passage, Nhamo is trying to display his importance to Tambu, and at the same time he degrading her by saying that since she is a female she does not deserve an education. He emphasizes Tambu's inferiority even further, saying: 'Did you ever hear of a girl being taken away to school? You are lucky you even managed to go back to Rutivi. With me it's different. *I was meant to be educated*' (italics mine: 49). In his statement, Nhamo shows that he does not really value education in itself, except insofar as it provides proof of his own superiority, as a male child. This form of oppression experienced by girls in this society is indicative of one of the obstacles women need to overcome in their journeys towards self-realization and empowerment. Various African feminist critics have expanded on this. For instance, Ogundipe-Leslie states that 'African women have more burdens to bear' than western women in this regard (cited in Boyce Davies, 7). Dangarembga draws attention to this in her novel, and when highlighting the way this feature of gender oppression, she also depicts ways in which it can be challenged. Various other obstacles with which African women are confronted will be outlined in the following sections.

Eventually, after Nhamo's demise, Babamukuru suggests that someone else be sent to school, only choosing Tambu out of desperation and lack of an appropriate candidate, a male child,

as is evident in Tambu's description of this event. The death of Tambu's brother enables her to live with Babamukuru, who has been educated in the West and is the principal economic provider of the family. It is also worth noting that this particular incident Babamukuru does not seem to remember Tambu's name initially, and refers her to as 'Er - this girl- heyo, Tambudzai' (56), as if she is so unimportant as a girl that he does not even recollect her name:

[A]fter a decent length of time had passed; Babamukuru again raised the question of emancipation of my father's branch of the family. It is unfortunate,' he said, 'that there is no male child to take this duty, to take this job of raising the family from hunger and need, Jeremiah (56).

When Babamukuru mentions that it is unfortunate that there is no male child to take care of the family, and thus to receive an education that would equip them well to do so, it shows that female children are undermined to such an extent that they often tend to be deemed unworthy of even the slightest of opportunities that might be available to them. This also indicates that Babamukuru is of the opinion that women are not able to take on any position of serious economic responsibility and are unfit to play leadership roles of any kind. Moreover, Babamukuru's perception that not only male children have the potential to raise and care for the family is not an accurate one, as the discussion of Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* indicates. Similarly, Tambu's father emphasizes the worthlessness of educating girls when he says: 'Tambudzai's sharpness with her books is no use because in the end it will benefit strangers' (56). This assertion shows the extent to which the traditional Shona patriarchal system does not endorse the education of the girl child, since it is not in keeping with their lowly position in society. Tambu's father displays this earlier on when he asks her: '[C]an you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables' (15). This is also indicative of the extent to which she is not viewed as an independent person but as another man's appendage. Some of the implications of this will be examined further on. Furthermore, this depicts that women are regarded as mere family property, suited only for menial tasks of this nature and destined for marriage and motherhood only. The fact that they might want more from their lives is not taken into account.

Women in the society in *Nervous Conditions* are also disempowered because they have many other burdens to carry. Tambu's mother tells her that 'this business of womanhood is a heavy burden', maintaining that the only course of action available to her is to endure her sufferings



in silence and ‘learn to carry [her] burdens with strength’ (16). Thus, Mainini is of the opinion that women should submit passively to their sufferings, as though there is no way they can overcome them. Here, she alludes to the triple burdens that women such as her carry: those of race, gender and class. The first and third of these burdens will be examined next. Firstly, the extent to which colonialism contributes to women’s oppression in Tambu’s society will be discussed.

### **Triple Oppression: The Colonial Factor**

Dangarembga’s novel vividly describes the condition of both colonized men and women in pre-independence Zimbabwe, although this section focuses on the way in which this affects women’s lives. The characters in the novel experience various kinds of obstacles caused by racial, gender and economic oppression, some of which are interconnected. Therefore, while colonialism deprived and undermined the native inhabitants of Africa, it affected black women especially harshly, as a result of their subordinate position in the social hierarchy. Then, economically deprived women such as Mainini suffer in particular. As a result of the way in which black women’s subordinate social position and lack of possibilities in life is worsened by colonialism, they are particularly likely to fall victim to the ‘nervous condition’ to which Fanon alludes, as is evident in Dangarembga’s book.

Shirley Broekman observes that that which Tambu’s mother describes as ‘the poverty of blackness’ denotes the economic degradation that was experienced by the black population as a result of colonialism, intensifying the forms of suffering experienced by colonized women. Broekman goes on to say ‘[T]he weight of womanhood’ refers to ‘the self-sacrifice and ceaseless labour involved in fulfilling the prescribed role of good wife and mother in Shona patriarchal society’ (14). Thus, the way in which women suffer from triple oppression of this kind in *Nervous Conditions* bears out black feminist and womanist convictions that gender-related issues cannot be viewed in isolation from issues of race and class. For instance, Supriya Nair argues that ‘if colonized men experience anxiety, the nervous tension women experience as subjects of dual and interlocking forms of oppression must be extreme’ (1995: 130). Stratton makes an observation that concurs with this, when she states: ‘[c]olonialism is not neutral to gender. Rather it is patriarchal order, sexist as well as racist in its ideology and practices’ (cited in Broekman: 23). In this way, she emphasizes that colonialism reinforces

other systems that oppress women. As is evident in Tambu's family, the system of colonialism degrades and dispossesses many, offering certain limited benefits to only a few. This continues to take place in postcolonial societies. As we have already noted, many formerly colonized people are still economically disadvantaged, particularly as a result of the effects of various forms of neocolonial and economic control. This affects women in particular, in that they take special responsibility for their families in such difficult times, thus weighed down by the triple burden of race, class and gender oppression.

Moreover, the colonial situation did not encourage the education of the girl child, as Rodney observes in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*:

To recommend that African girls should go to school is more than just an educational policy. It has tremendous social implications, and it pre-supposes that the society will usefully employ educated women. Metropolitan capitalist society itself had failed to liberate women, to offer them equal educational opportunities, or to provide them with responsibilities, jobs at equal pay with men. Therefore the extremely limited employment sector in the colonies had nothing to offer educated women and modern education remained a luxury with which few African women came into contact (276).

As an African girl in such a time, especially in economically deprived surroundings, Tambu has no choice in the matter but to watch her brother acquire education, as was the norm. Nonetheless, Tambu has great aspirations for her personal education, despite the obstacles relating to race, class and gender that stand in her way.

*Nervous Conditions* also illustrates other related forms of deprivation brought about by colonialism. When the white man set foot in Africa, he dispossessed the African not only of his dignity, but also of the valuable things that he possessed, such as land. Fanon identifies the loss of land as a great setback for the colonized, as he observes: '[F]or a colonized people the most essential value and most concrete is first and foremost the land. The land which will bring them bread and above all dignity' (1986: 34). Bundy makes a similar point, emphasizing that dispossessing the colonized people of their land constituted one of the most damaging and disruptive features of colonialism. In describing 'the destructive impact of white rule', Bundy draws attention to 'the hammer-blow of sweeping land expropriations and sudden land shortage, and on the other hand, the dislocation of the traditional economy and

social order,...commercialized market economy (1). Although this describes the situation of South Africa, it can also be applied to pre-independence Zimbabwe.

Bundy's points indicate that African people had no other source of income or any other way of supporting themselves but to seek for assistance from the white men, who needed black men as cheap labour power. In Tambu's grandmother's time, 'the white wizard had no use for women and children' (18). This aggravated the situation of women, subordinated not only to the men in their lives but also by forms of colonial oppression. This also placed more pressure on women to care for their homesteads and families, while their men laboured for the colonizers. For instance, Tambu's grandmother is left on her own with Babamukuru after her husband is killed in the white people's mines (18-19). The Sigauke family is deeply affected by this, because they are deprived of the fertile land they possessed, as Tambu's grandmother tells her:

Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land...But the wizards were avaricious and grasping; there was less and less land for the people. At last the people came upon the grey, sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it (18).

Words like 'treachery', and 'avaricious and grasping' show the extent to which the colonizers were greedy, ruthless and deceitful. The words 'black magic' do not refer to witchcraft, but show that the suffering caused by the white colonizers is so disturbing and destructive that it may seem comparable to the effect of sorcery to those experiencing it. Also, witchcraft is viewed as a mysterious force and comparably many aspects of colonialism may seem unfathomable to colonized peoples. As Tambu's whole family was driven from richer soils on which they could produce sufficient food to 'the grey, sandy soils', this resulted in economic desperation, forcing Tambu's extended family to rely on Babamukuru for support. Babamukuru is under dual pressure to care for his family members, who view him as their all-powerful provider, and he also has to ensure that he pleases the missionaries in every way. Moreover, he is determined to be a hard worker in order to be accepted by the missionaries and he wants to maintain this high standard throughout his career: 'He was diligent, he was industrious, he was respectful. They thought he was a good boy, cultivatable, in the way that the land is, to yield harvest that sustain the cultivator' (19).

Broekman further observes that the words ‘sustain the cultivator’ may implicate that Babamukuru ‘lacks the critical ability and consciousness to make independent decisions, but will simply retain and regurgitate ideas that are planted in his young, impressionable mind’, thereby highlighting to the powerful influence of education he received which indoctrinates him in the ways of the colonizers (17). This also indicates that the colonial education Babamukuru receives breeds insecurity to the extent that he does not trust his own judgement and defers to that of the missionaries and lacks confidence in his own ability to think for himself. As we will see, the detrimental effect of colonial education on Babamukuru has a damaging effect on the women in his life. Furthermore, the above-cited extract bears out an observation made by Ngugi, which concurs with Bhabha’s point cited earlier in this chapter. Ngugi describes the way that colonialism undermines the colonized, stating that ‘the colonial system produced the kind of education which nurtured subservience, self-hatred and mutual suspicion’ (1986: 14).

Though Babamukuru works hard, he feels obliged to ‘endure and obey, believing that ‘there is no other way’ (19). It is clear that the white missionaries expected to benefit from educating young people such as Babamukuru, in that they would help impose their ways on the colonized. In this respect, education also served the needs of the colonizers as part of the cultivation of professional colonized people, assimilated into the colonial system. Rodney also comments on the way in which colonial education was meant to enslave an individual mentally and psychologically as well as physically, when he states: ‘[C]olonial schooling was education for subordination, exploitation, the creation of mental confusion and the development of underdevelopment. Colonial education was a series of limitations inside other limitations’ (264). Ketu. H. Katrak discusses this issue further, commenting on the extent to which the colonial education system created additional problems for women in colonial societies, remarking:

[A] gendered educational system placed women in complex, sometimes worse positions than in pre-colonial times in relationship to their own communities. Education was devised to create a civil servant class, predominantly, that would aid a colonial administration’ (1995).

The ‘civil servant class’ was principally male and this created more problems for women. For his part, Babamukuru, though well educated with the key to open all economic doors, has his

own nervous condition stemming from the effects of colonialism, with which he struggles each and every day. The fact that he has been taken in by the missionaries and been offered an opportunity to advance in life makes him submit to them unquestioningly, and those who are beneath him in the social hierarchy are expected to treat him in the same way. The least of the things that he want is to be regarded as an ungrateful 'native' or 'bad kaffir'(14) for he feels that if he ever had to disobey the white authorities in any way, all his opportunities would be withdrawn from him: 'The missionaries would have been annoyed by his ingratitude. He would have fallen from grace with them and they would have taken under their wings another promising young African in his place' (14).

The fact the white men controlled the economic resources forced Babamukuru to submit to the 'wizards', and this pattern repeats itself at an extended family level, for Babamukuru expects the family to submit to him in a similar way, because he is their sole provider, since the majority of his extended family has been impoverished by colonialism. Again, the position of economic privilege he acquires as a result of his colonial education puts more pressure on him as a man: as a family patriarch, he is compelled to care for his extended family.

This situation worsens the position of the colonized peoples in other respects. The African men who view themselves as superior to African women are often afflicted with poverty due to the fact that education, which was the key to economic empowerment at that time, was only granted to a few lucky ones, many of whom were destined for the civil servant class. Thus, they are disempowered and rendered subservient to others. This is another indication of the womanist aspects of the novel in that through her focus on colonialism, Dangarembga not only draws attention to African women's sufferings, but emphasizes the way in which African men were oppressed by the colonial system too. Black feminists theorists also take cognizance of this. For instance, hooks comments on the extent to which black men are economically deprived: '[W]omen in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's liberation as gaining social equality with men...[T]hey know that many males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed' (18).

Thus, an awareness of the forms of oppression black men may experience is one of the key principles underlying black feminist and womanist theory, differentiating them from white

Anglo-American feminism. Men such as Jeremiah and Takesure are disempowered, in that they feel they need to 'grovel' to Babamukuru, their social superior and the head of the family, for money, security and his acceptance. These two men never manage to beat their 'nervous condition' of physical poverty, laziness and the forms of psychological disempowerment this generates, always exercising their routine of begging from Babamukuru and accepting whatever he says, without thinking for themselves. Thus, they do not consider how badly they are treating women in their lives, because they feel deprived and disempowered as poverty-stricken colonized people and this erodes their capacities to show consideration for those around them.

The disharmony and discontent in Tambu's family and the conflict between Nyasha and her father Babamukuru, all of which arise from the above-outlined situation, is a clear example of how colonialism has disrupted the social order, not only at a community but also at a family level, thereby aggravating the situation of women. When Tambu accepts the opportunity of missionary schooling, it offers her more insight into her uncle's family, and the extent to which colonialism has affected their family dynamics and way of life. To some extent, this leaves one realizing that the unity and harmony that might have existed in Tambu's extended family has been damaged as a result of the influence of the British colonial culture. Were it not for the divisions and discord generated by the colonial authorities, there could have been certain problems stemming from patriarchal forms of authority, but perhaps in a considerably reduced form. Nyasha points out to Tambu that her father abases himself before the white men and how he humiliates himself in the process. Tambu is made aware of the effect this has on Nyasha and her family. Nyasha also draws attention to the way colonialism has created divisions within the family, and disruption and damage at an individual psychological level: 'Do you see what they've done? They've taken us away. Lucia. Takesure. All of us. They've deprived you of you, him of him, ourselves of each other. We're groveling. Lucia for a job, Jeremiah for money. Daddy grovels to them. We grovel to him' (200).

The word 'groveling' indicates the extent of desperation of the black people in Shona society, and the extent to which they are forced to abase themselves in order to survive, and receive that which they value in life, such as education and a career. In the above passage, Nyasha describes the divisions and tensions between the members of her family, created by colonialism. She also states that colonialism has violated their relationships with one another,

‘depriving them of each other’. Thus, there is a lack of solidarity amongst family members and also in the community at large. In part, this is because in terms of the colonial ethos, the individual is prioritized at the cost of the communal. Thus, a privileged few benefit, while many are exploited. Nyasha refuses to ‘grovel’ before the colonizers, by refusing to submit to her father’s authority. Nyasha refuses to do what her father expects of her, since he requires her to conform not only to the colonial ethos, but also to traditional patriarchal ideals of the African woman as obedient and submissive to all forms of male authority. She questions that upon which his authority is based, such as the limited amount of privilege and influence he is granted by the colonizers, provided he submits to them.

Consequently, as Petersen observes, this gives rise to a situation in which: ‘[w]omen are twice colonized- by colonialist realities and realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too’ (1986). Thus, colonialism gives rise to diverse forms of gender oppression, in that women are expected to abase themselves not only before colonial authorities but also before the men in their lives. It has also disrupted the order of things for, as the above extract reveals, many people, both women and men, have to abase themselves, and beg for that which they need, therefore becoming dependent on others. For example, Lucia needs a job and has to ask Babamukuru to assist her; Jeremiah, a good-for-nothing man, who pleads with Babamukuru for money at every possible opportunity.

This creates further divisions amongst other family members such as Mainini who does not relate well to her sister-in-law, because she feels sidelined, especially when she compares her status with that of Maiguru. This provides further evidence of the way the colonial system disempowers African women, inflicting forms of tension and suffering upon them. Maiguru and Mainini both face the same the same obstacle: that of patriarchal oppression, but Maiguru’s status as the headmaster’s wife and the fact that she is a professional woman who earns her own salary, privileges attained by means of colonialism, establishes a class difference between herself and Mainini. To an extent, this adds to their problems, creating such animosity between them that Mainini even accuses Maiguru of killing her son when he dies while he is in her and Babamukuru’s care.

Mainini feels inferior to Maiguru not only on account of their class differences, but also because Maiguru is also educated, which sets her apart from other women in the Sigauke

family. All the women feel obliged to listen to her because of her status, acquired through the colonial educational system. Mainini says: ‘ “Because Maiguru is educated. That’s why you kept quiet. Because she is rich and comes here and flashes her money around, so you listen to her as though you want to eat the words that come out of her mouth (140). This indicates that because Maiguru is rich, many other African people around her feel inferior to her, her family included, and this also highlights the fact that various economically deprived Africans tend to abase themselves before wealthy people. For instance, in the above extract, Mainini points out ‘that’s why you kept quiet because she is rich’. This is also the case in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1954), in which the Ghanaian poor idolize the rich, hoping that they may receive something from them.

Another important issue to take note of in this novel is hybridity. Bhabha asserts that hybridity is a ‘problematic of colonial representation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that ‘other’ denied knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse’ (162). The colonized become influenced by colonial norms and perceptions, absorbing them to varying degrees, as is evident in Babamukuru’s behaviour and also that of Nhamo, who becomes ashamed of his father and his family’s poverty. Moreover, this awareness of the ideology of the colonizers undermines the colonized people, making them realize that they are viewed as inferior. This is evident, for example, in the arrogant way Tambu and Mr Matimba are treated by the whites when she tries to sell her mealies (28), and the way African scholars are treated at Sacred Heart Convert. Thus, Tambu is made aware of her subordinate position, for she does not have the same privileges accorded to the white students. Events such as these draw Tambu’s attention to the way she is viewed as inferior, as a colonized person.

The damaging effects of colonialism extend through Tambu’s family. For example, in various significant respects, Tambu’s mother is also trapped in a situation that she does not know how to change as a result of colonialism. For instance, she is against the idea of undergoing a white wedding. This was Babamukuru’s idea, for he wishes Mainini and Jeremiah to be married in the church, so as to legitimize their union in the eyes of the colonizers. Thus, Babamukuru attempts to bestow a sense of western respectability upon his family so that the missionaries, as representatives of white colonial authority, will approve of them. On the other hand, Mainini and Jeremiah will be made aware of their inferior position, as the black



people who need vindication from the white colonizers. Tambu feels this undermines their culture and tradition, so being obliged to go through a charade of this nature degrades them in various respects, functioning as a form of 'othering'. On the other hand, Babamukuru also views this as a way of redeeming the family from a series of misfortunes that it had been experiencing. Wendy Woodward discusses the colonial implications of this wedding, observing that Babamukuru makes his decision influenced by colonial perceptions, as he is motivated to 'reform' his brother who is ostensibly 'still living in sin' in colonial eyes (1993: 83). Most importantly, Babamukuru wants the white wedding to serve as proof of his submission to colonial authority and thus as a token of his obedience. In addition, Babamukuru's plan for a wedding of this nature is a way of demonstrating Babamukuru's patriarchal authority. As a head of the extended family, he expects family members to obey his commands, however unreasonable they may be.

Consequently, Babamukuru's 'bad nerves' are a part of the 'nervous condition', generated by his desire to please the white missionaries, as a result of which he suffers forms of psychological entrapment. Tambu states: 'Maiguru said [Babamukuru's] nerves were bad. His nerves were bad because he was so busy' (102). As a result of this state of affairs, Babamukuru is constantly trapped working in his office till late hours, as he had proved to be as 'cultivable' as the white man wanted him to be. Thus, he is often separated from his wife and family (80). Ironically, even the privileges Babamukuru receives from the colonizers disempowers him further, not only by stunting his emotional and psychological growth, but also by depriving him of certain life skills. As a result, Babamukuru is inclined to behave in an autocratic, dictatorial way, especially towards the women of the family, as indicated below:

[H]e was a rigid, imposing perfectionist, steely enough in character to function in the puritanical way that he expected, or rather insisted, that the rest of the world should function. Luckily, or maybe unluckily for him, throughout his life Babamukuru had found himself- as eldest child and son, an early educated African, as headmaster, as husband and father, as provider to many- in positions that enabled him to organize his immediate world and its contents as he wished (87).

On account of this state of affairs, Babamukuru believes that there is no reason why he should not impose a western-style white wedding upon an unwilling participant, Mainini. He duplicates the ways of the white man and enforces them upon his family, 'insisting that the rest of the world should function' in the way that he expects. In part, the 'nervous condition'

he experiences is evidence that African men are also victimized, since they suffer at the hands of the colonizers. Dangarembga comments on this on an interview, drawing attention to the forms of suffering both African men and women experience:

I think the easy answer in the west is the patriarchal system. I have become increasingly more reluctant to use this model of analysis as it is put forward by western feminism, because the situation in my part of the world has one variable, which makes it absolutely different: the men are also victims (cited in Broekman 1999: 24).

Once again, this concurs with aspects of womanism. For instance, Ogunyemi mentions that 'black women are disadvantaged in several ways: as blacks they, with their men are victims of a white patriarchal culture' (67). Yet again, this highlights a reason why *Nervous Conditions* is best analysed in terms of both womanist and black feminist perspectives. Dangarembga, shows a certain amount of sympathy for Babamukuru, despite his heavy-handed, autocratic patriarchal behaviour. Driven by forces to which he feels duty bound to submit, Babamukuru imposes his solutions upon others, in a bid to reassert his authority in order to boost his ego and to impose the will of the colonizers on his family. As a result of her disapproval of the white wedding, Mainini eventually suffers from grief and depression and develops deep resentment towards Babamukuru, which she is reluctant to express openly. Thus, she represses her feelings, and as a result, a depth of anger and resentment builds up inside her, giving rise to the 'nervous condition' from which she suffers. This is evident when she laments: 'To wear a veil, at my age, to wear a veil! Just imagine- to wear a veil. If I were a witch I would enfeeble his mind, truly I would do it, and then we would see how his education and his money helped him (184). Mainini's repetition of 'to wear a veil' reveals the depth of bitterness and the pain that she experiences when she feels compelled to participate in an event that is humiliating to her. The degree of her bitterness is shown in the way she wishes that she were a witch who could 'enfeeble Babamukuru's mind' in order to exact her revenge. It is worth noting that, in *The Book of Not*, a sequel to *Nervous Conditions*, the suppressed anger within Mainini leads her to exact vengeance on Babamukuru by informing the Big Brothers (the freedom fighters) that Babamukuru was in association with the white men. This becomes Mainini's alternative to 'enfeebling' his mind, because then Babamukuru is beaten and narrowly escapes death. Tambu describes this saying Mainini was 'breathing in catches of satisfaction like a woman who has not been gratified for too long, caressed upon untouched places' (2006: 14). The extent of Mainini's deprivation from

dignity and sensual satisfaction is still evident here. She is 'satisfied' because according to her, Babamukuru is receiving punishment for the way he had treated her.

The divisions caused by colonialism continue to have detrimental effects on women. For instance, Mainini views Maiguru as a woman who has no firm roots in her Shona culture, not only because she has a successful professional woman, but also because she and her family seem too deeply attached to western culture and she cannot guide her children according to societal expectations (140). Colonialism disrupts families in other ways, separating Tambu's family from Nyasha's, as they leave to study abroad and return affected by the 'Englishness' (203). Tambu cannot understand why her cousins have changed so much after their return from England: 'I had not expected my cousins to have changed, certainly not so radically, simply because they had been away for a while (42). This continues to alienate Maiguru and her children from the rest of the family. It is also worth noting that Mainini blames much of the suffering in the family on this. Tambu reveals that Maiguru cannot really cope well with the way colonialism is affecting her family: ' "They are too Anglicized," explained Maiguru, with a little laugh so that it was difficult to tell whether she was censoring Nyasha for her Anglicized habits or me for my lack of them' (74).

Maiguru is aware that it is a problem for her children 'to be too Anglicized' but she does not know how to deal with it. The words 'with a little laugh' display that Maiguru feels embarrassed and awkward, but believes that the situation is beyond her control. Meanwhile, Nyasha strives for independence and the right to self-expression, but she is also aware that there are too many different influences at work in her life. She is a hybrid and this impedes her capacity to attain a sense of complete selfhood which would aid her in her struggle to express herself effectively. Minh-ha Trinh describes how the concept of authenticity has bearing on a situation of this nature:

Authenticity as a need to rely on 'undisputed origin' is prey to an obsessive fear: that of losing a connection. Everything must hold together... a clear origin will give me a connection back through time, and I shall by all means, search for that genuine layer of myself to which I can always cling (1989: 94).

Nyasha searches for that to which she can cling, but she fails, and this results in her breakdown. Although she tries to combine both sides of her nature as a western-educated African person, she feels that she does not really truly belong to either of the two cultures.

She tells Tambu: 'I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you' (201). Nyasha might have the privilege of possessing most of the things that she needs, such as access to a good education and a decent meal each day, but this is at the cost of her own sense of rootedness and belonging. For instance, she points out to Tambu that her parents should not have gone with them to England as it had alienated her from her culture: '[N]ow they're stuck with hybrids for children. And they don't like it at all. It offends them. I can't help having been there and grown into the me that has been there. But it offends them- I offend them' (78). Nyasha is aware that her 'nervous' condition has been caused by colonialism and in the above extract, we are made aware of the negative hybridity discussed earlier. Consequently, Nyasha's sense of self is eroded so she finds it difficult to base her resistance on a solid sense of who she is. Thus, often interconnected forms of colonial and gender oppression exercise a particularly damaging effect on her.

As we see in *Nervous Conditions* as well as in *The Book of Not*, colonialism and gender oppression are intertwined in other respects, and this intensifies the forms of oppression with which women are beset, giving rise to obstacles to empowerment. Moreover, colonialism does not only further reinforce the oppression of both women and men, but it also encourages men to exercise patriarchal dominion, and increases their desire to control women, as will be shown in the next section.

### **Patriarchy and women**

A man's home is his castle.

The above aphorism shows that in terms of patriarchal systems of authority and control, men view their homes as their castles and they feel that have to show their strength and ability to dominate those around them, just as a ruler of a castle would. Many of the pressures experienced by the women in *Nervous Conditions* emanate from this. The author presents us with a patriarchal system that has some similarities with those discussed in the preceding two primary texts, but also differs from them in certain significant respects. As this indicates, patriarchal domination is a system of control that varies from place to place within the African continent, affected by various contextual factors. In this context, Babamukuru, the family patriarch is influenced by the colonial situation. As we have already seen, African men

are emasculated by the white colonial authorities and left powerless in various significant respects. To compensate for the loss of status, the colonized men attempt to subjugate women and treat them in the same heavy-handed way in which they are treated by the white authorities. Babamukuru reacts in a heavy-handed authoritarian way when he thinks that Nyasha and Tambu are challenging him. Babamukuru feels that he has to enforce his patriarchal authority within his family circle; otherwise he feels his masculinity will be impaired. Consequently, Babamukuru feels anger and resentment when he thinks that Nyasha is not respecting him enough as she ought to do. For instance, he says to Nyasha: 'You must respect me. I am your father... We cannot have two men in the house (113; 115). Accordingly, Nyasha wants to break free from her father's control, as well as the control of the colonialists and the two become interconnected in the figure of her father.

Although this is applicable to Nnaife in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* to a certain extent, it is particularly relevant in Babamukuru's case, since he is a strong believer in traditional ways, such as the importance of extended family, and the value of the communal ethos, despite the fact that he also has to uphold the beliefs and practices of the western colonizers.

It has become a known fact that in both western and African societies the patriarchal family constitutes the basic unit for maintaining social order, and training and socializing children for their gender roles, unequal as they are. The education that Babamukuru has acquired makes him a widely respected figure. Thus, he is in an especially strong position to exert patriarchal control and to further socialization of this kind. The difference between Babamukuru and the other Shona men in the novel testifies to his privileged upbringing, and as a result of this, his view of women differs from theirs in various respects. A view of his kind enables Tambu to receive the opportunity to continue with her education. However, although Babamukuru extols education, he tells the whole family that it makes a woman better equipped to carry out her socially ordained role. This is evident when he tells Tambu how lucky she had been to receive the opportunity to further her education, saying: '[A]t the mission I would not only go to school but learn ways and habits that would make my parents proud of me. I was an intelligent girl but I had also to develop into a good woman, he said, stressing both qualities equally and not seeing any contradiction in this' (88).

The above citation also shows how women are viewed in terms of traditional patriarchal Shona culture, and why, in terms of such perceptions, it is deemed advantageous for Tambu to be given an opportunity to acquire an education. Babamukuru has been able to progress further in life as a result of education and consequently he believes that it is only education that can enable a person to realize their potential. However, he wants Tambu to be educated primarily in order for her to be of benefit to her family. Furthermore, he assumes that as a 'good' woman, she is destined to be married, after which she will serve the needs of another family (56).

Besides enabling Babamukuru to take charge of the homestead, his education sets him apart, as an influential patriarchal figure in his extended family. His decisions are not necessarily in the interests of those upon whom he seeks to impose them, and this can have problematic implications for some women of the family, such as Mainini. For instance, we have seen that he exercises his authority by insisting that a belated wedding for Jeremiah and Mainini will cleanse the family of all their misfortunes, such as the death of Nhamo. Moreover, Mainini is hardly ever consulted concerning the welfare of her children's lives; and the family meetings are always held in the dining room, whilst the women are relegated to the kitchen. This indicates that even though women in diverse African societies may strive for the particular well-being of every member of the family, it does not mean that they will be allowed to make important decisions regarding the future of their children.

This situation also reveals that, in terms of traditional patriarchal perspectives in Tambu's society, it is a woman's duty to produce children and care for them, but the men decide what should be done with them. When Tambu obtains the opportunity to go to Sacred Heart, Mainini is bewildered and even more distressed and she cries: 'I've had enough of that man dividing me from my children ... and ruling my life. He says this and we jump' (184). Mainini's exclusion is one of the reasons for her depression, because she fears that she will lose her daughter to the 'Englishness' caused by western colonial influences, just as she believes she lost her son. Therefore, as a woman she is deprived of a say over the lives of her children. Tambu describes this in the following way: 'My mother's anxiety was real. By the time I left she was so haggard and gaunt she could hardly walk to the fields, let alone work in them' (57).

From the above, it shows that women in Shona society tend to be left to suffer from the unilateral decisions that are made by men. The only way that women can express their feelings is through succumbing to 'nervous conditions' by further withdrawing into themselves or allowing sickness to take the best out of them, as does Tambu's mother. She feels that she is being robbed of her womanhood by giving birth to children and yet being deprived of the opportunity to enjoy her motherhood sufficiently. The way Tambu's mother withdraws into herself shows the bitterness of insecure mother who feels robbed because she is prevented from taking care of her family because of her poverty, and also as a result of her lowly status as a woman. Marilee Karl comments on women's position in African societies in situations of this nature, remarking that women have

the primary responsibility for their families' health and for provision of food, water and fuel and their work is not only unpaid, but largely unrecognized as well. Their major responsibilities for the households' well-being do not always mean decision making power within the family (1995: 30).

Thus, despite their subordinate position, women in *Nervous Conditions* are responsible for taking care of the children and serving the needs of everyone in the household. In a discussion of women's issues in South Africa, Quinlan. A. Wolpe and L. Martinez make the following observation: 'Many South African women are trapped in traditional roles because men do not take equal responsibility for family care and will not do what they regard as women's work' (1997: 23). This is also applies to many other African societies, including the societies depicted in *Nervous Conditions* and the other two primary texts.

Women's only areas of responsibility are the household tasks, and the domestic space is the only place which they fully regard as their own. However, when Tambu goes to Babamukuru's home, she immediately notices the striking differences between the places that are meant for women and those that are meant for men. For instance, when she enters the house through the back door that leads to the kitchen, it is clear that it is neglected because it is for women:

I remember that the cooker had only three plates, none of which was a ring; that the kettle was not electric; that the refrigerator was a bulky paraffin-powered affair. The linoleum was old, its blue and white pattern fading to patches of red where the paint had worn off and patches of black where feet had scuffed up the old flooring at its seams and water had dripped from hands and vegetables and crockery to create a stubborn black scum. The kitchen window was not curtained; a pane of glass was missing (67).

Tambu's observation shows the extent to which the kitchen had become dilapidated due to poor maintenance. Initially, she finds it impressive, but as she grows older, she begins to understand why the kitchen had been allowed to fall into this state. Also she notices that it is not as 'sophisticated' (67) as it first appeared. This is because Babamukuru paid no attention to such matters, as he was hardly ever in the kitchen and therefore did not notice its state. Even if he had noticed, he probably would have not cared that the place was in need of serious repairs. Maiguru expresses displeasure that the men in the house never had time to 'fix' the place (67). The fact that Babamukuru has no time for such matters highlights the extent to which, in terms of traditional perceptions, women's spaces in the household, in which they were expected to carry out many of their duties, were viewed as places of little importance. This is in contrast to the living room, the place in which Babamukuru usually spends his time. Tambu notices that the living room is more elegant than the kitchen, so she says: 'Babamukuru's taste was excellent, so that where he could afford to indulge it, the results were striking. The opulence of his living-room was very strong stuff, overwhelming .... Comfortable it was, but overwhelming nevertheless' (69). The words 'strong stuff' refers to the way Babamukuru likes to appear to those around him, and likewise, he wants 'overwhelming' control over his family. Brenda Bosman comments on the house in *Nervous Conditions*, saying:

For in a building's design and internal operation are codified a number of significant power issues such as social and economic position, gender hierarchy, authority (who has what and how is it shared, if at all), walls/boundaries and freedom, among other things. Thus a building can be a site of conflict....Babamukuru suppresses other voices, particularly those of women, and delineates and policies and non negotiable male/godlike power, both physical and ideological (1996: 306).

This could be related to Tambu's perception of the mission house as a 'heaven'(70) but it also reinforces the way in which Babamukuru imposes his authority on his household as if he is some sort of domestic god. Instead of the peace that should characterize heaven, it is a place of discord and frustration. Bosman goes on to say that, unlike the vast space in the dining room, there is insufficient space in the kitchen for women's voices and presences. It transpires that this kind of heaven does not have enough room for everybody, but it is a narrow, congested, threatening and saddening place, especially when the women have to talk in hushed voices because of Babamukuru's bad nerves (101). The vastness of the sitting room



is indicative of the way in which Babamukuru wishes his authority to be conspicuous and all-encompassing within his domestic space and does not want his authority to be undermined. This is evident in the way in which he responds to Nyasha, when she challenges him. He feels threatened and he says: 'She has dared to challenge me. Me! Her father. I am telling you today she will not live' (115). In this way, Babamukuru emphasizes that his ego has been hurt and to make matters worse, it has been challenged by a woman. Then, Babamukuru inflicts physical and verbal abuse upon Nyasha, declaring that she 'deserves to die' (115). This is indicative of the extent to which he cannot deal with challenge to his 'sacred' authority. Nyasha challenges her father's authority by hitting him back, not only because she cannot submit to his patriarchal authority, but also because she is influenced by western notions of independence and the right to self-expression, and believes she has the right to retaliate when physical violence is inflicted upon her.

Maiguru is also oppressed by patriarchal dominion and cannot achieve what she would have accomplished had she been a man. She has the same educational qualifications as Babamukuru, but because she is a woman her education is not acknowledged in the way that his is. Nonetheless, she is prepared to accept this, showing her inability to break free from deeply entrenched gender roles. Tambu is startled to learn that Maiguru has a postgraduate degree (101). It is evident that in the Shona patriarchal society women can never be expected to achieve anything equal to that of a man, and thus no one ever mentions Maiguru's achievements. It is only Babamukuru who receives all the praise for being an educated and knowledgeable man, while Maiguru is merely viewed as a good African woman who had gone to South Africa and England to care for her husband. Moreover, Maiguru's efforts and contribution are not recognized, as people are not aware that a significant part of the financial support they receive from Babamukuru derives from Maiguru's salary. Maiguru is aware that she is being oppressed (101). But, as will be discussed in the next section, she chooses security rather than self-actualisation. She fears that she would lose not only material security and the safety of her role as wife and mother but also a secure place in her society if she were to challenge this state of affairs. As a result, although Maiguru is aware of the unfairness of her situation and the forms of gender oppression imposed upon her, she simply feels that she has no option but to submit to them. This concurs with Katrin Berndt's statement:

Babamukuru's wife Maiguru lives the contradictions of her existence more consciously: she is aware of the contradictory judgment of a Shona woman who has lived in Europe and attained a university degree. As a man, she would hold a position of the highest status. But all the social prestige she owns is granted her because she is Babamukuru's wife and the mother of his children. Maiguru has acquired the symbols of her success outside of the Shona society in the same way Babamukuru has (2005: 90).

This extract does not only depict the evils of patriarchy in the Shona society, but it also shows how colonial policies contributed to the oppression of women in this society. Firstly, as already been noted, only a few black men had the opportunity to acquire an education and the colonizers made it as difficult as possible for the Africans to acquire this. Furthermore, we have already seen how both traditional patriarchal and colonial constraints made it much harder for women to obtain an education. Maiguru had managed to transcend all these limitations, but simply because she is a woman she could not be awarded the respect that is due to her on account of all that she has achieved.

Having noted the effects of colonialism and patriarchal control and the ways in which these influence not only the lives of the women but also the relationships between men and women, the reasons why some women like Maiguru chose to live in this way and are unable to break free of that which confines them will be examined in the next section.

### **Self and Security**

*Nervous Conditions* vividly depicts certain reasons why some women, such as Maiguru, stay in their marriages even when they know that they are being oppressed. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego prefers to stay in her relationship with the abusive Nnaife for similar reasons, although *Nervous Conditions* deals with these in more depth. With all other pressures such as economic deprivation, colonialism and patriarchy weighing them down, various women in the society in *Nervous Conditions* and many other societies still choose to sacrifice personal fulfillment for the sake of security, and Maiguru and also Mainini are illustrative of this.

In this way, such women surrender control not only over their lives but also of their own wishes and desires to the men to whom they submit. For example, Mainini does not want to participate in her own white wedding, but she feels unable to openly say so, because that

would mean undermining the patriarchal authority of the head of the extended family. Mainini senses subconsciously that it would result in serious consequences if she openly expresses what she thinks to Babamukuru at the time, thus she chooses the security of complying with her husband's wishes. Behaviour of this nature tends to be socially ordained. For instance, one key reason why Mainini and Maiguru submit to their situations is noted by C. Sweetman, who points out that 'many Zimbabwean women state that it is an acceptable cultural practice for women to be subordinate to men' (cited in Mbatha 2001: 20). P. Mbatha further maintains that, 'in subverting such utterances, Sweetman alludes to Chitsike's inquiry: "[W]hat is cultural about a women earning all the food through her sweat in the fields and preparing food for her husband and the children to sustain them when the man is drinking the day away?"' (Mbatha: 20). This is an accurate description of Mainini's situation, because she is always laboring in the fields whilst Jeremiah does practically nothing. However, she is prepared to accept this hard labour and economic deprivation for the sake of a place to stay, however inadequate, at the end of the day.

As a situation such as this indicates, a woman in a society such as the one in *Nervous Conditions* is expected to deny herself, and be of service to the man in her life. Although she may choose to do so as a result of a desire for security, this may make her behave in a self-effacing manner, and act in ways that are not necessarily in her own interests. This is evident, for example in the way Maiguru serves Babamukuru, addressing him in a manner that is inappropriate for a grown woman:

No, no, my daddy-dear,' chirped Maiguru, fussing with the dishes. 'We were only just about to begin. But now you have come. Help yourself, my daddy-pie!' with this she removed the lid from the serving dish nearest Babamukuru and held it for him respectfully with both hands while he spooned food on to his plate...This carried on until Babamukuru had helped himself from the third dish (80).

This whole process is such a slow-moving one, yet the rest of the family has to wait until Babamukuru finishes dishing for himself, although this must be very inconvenient for them. For instance, their food might be getting cold. Again, Maiguru's supposed chore of holding the plate for him is uncalled-for to some extent. Since the food is already on the table, Babamukuru can easily reach the food, but still he prefers to have Maiguru hold the plate and exchange the dishes for him whilst he waits, as a token of his authority. The way Maiguru addresses Babamukuru, using childish terms of endearment, shows the extent to which she

abases herself in order to receive her husband's approval. By reinforcing his patriarchal authority and her own inferior status, she is once again choosing security over self-affirmation. Maiguru is undermining herself, and thus her own capacity for independent thought and action and her own sense of self-respect, in the process.

As is evident in the passage cited earlier, Tambu also discovers that Maiguru had to give up many opportunities in order to be a socially acceptable wife and mother. As we have already seen, Tambu learns that even though Maiguru is well educated and earns even more money than her husband, she still chooses to be a submissive wife. In terms of traditional norms in Shona society, her position as a wife prohibits her from acting against her husband's will. This may call to mind the observation already made in the preceding chapter by Ogun-dipe-Leslie, who examines the extent to which Nigerian women are deprived of status and even their identities in their roles as wives. An observation of this nature also applies to Shona society, in which a woman such as Maiguru is reduced to this state. She never even has access to her own salary, as she reveals in a conversation with Tambu:

‘What happens to the money?’ I asked. ‘The money that you earn. Does the Government take it?’...  
‘You could say that,’ my aunt laughed, forcing herself to be merry again but succeeding ....  
‘What it is,’ she sighed, ‘to have to choose between self and security. When I was in England I glimpsed for a little of the things I could have been, the things I could have done if – if – if things were different – But there was BabawaChido and the children and the family (102).

This passage reveals more about all that Maiguru felt obliged to relinquish in her marriage to Babamukuru. She did this in order to maintain the respect she had been given and her own secure position in society. The repetition of the word ‘if’ depicts her own sadness and her awareness of all that she has relinquished, but she is hesitant to disclose her feelings fully. It appears that Maiguru is afraid of what people would say about her if she abandoned her family to pursue her dreams. Maiguru also does not feel capable living of independently, without her husband's protection. Emecheta makes a point that can relate to Maiguru, when she states in an interview that a woman without a husband may not be respected, no matter how well educated she might be:

[I]n Nigeria I am not so sure, because a woman who has children without a husband is still not respected. Whether she is a Ph.D or not, they still talk about her. Unless she accepts the protection of any 'foolish' man so she can be a 'Mrs' somebody, she has no significance' (James: 44).

Significantly Maiguru ends her speech by affirming the value of being a wife and mother, indicative of the way she has chosen security over self. Moreover, as an observation such as Emecheta's suggests, Maiguru would have been labeled a 'bad' African woman in that she would have failed to carry out her socially ordained role as a dutiful, submissive wife and mother. Thus, Tambu concludes: '[I]f it was necessary to efface yourself, as Maiguru did so well that you couldn't be sure that she didn't enjoy it, if it was necessary to efface yourself in order to preserve his sense of identity and value, then, I was sure, Maiguru had taken the correct decisions' (102).

Therefore Maiguru chooses self and conceals her own intellectual ability, renounces her right to control her own earnings and loses confidence in her own capacities. She 'effaces' herself by foregoing her personal needs and feelings and relinquishing possibilities of fulfillment and self-realization in order to preserve Babamukuru's sense of dignity and his position within his family. Instead, she nourishes a belief in Babamukuru's superhuman competence and generosity, although he is a fallible human being subject to various limitations, as Tambu herself will eventually realize.

In general, Maiguru finds security in the socially constructed identity of a good woman, as she does when her family participates in the Christmas gatherings at Tambu's family homestead. Eventually, however, this is one of the principal factors that make her leave her home temporarily. While at the family Christmas gatherings, she does what is expected of her as a senior woman, working hardest of all and providing both food and cooking facilities (185). Although she leaves her husband temporarily, as a result of the domestic pressures placed upon her, along with various other factors, she eventually returns to the security of her home and her husband at the cost of her personal selfhood. Even though Maiguru contributes to the well-being of the family, her efforts are hardly recognized and no-one acknowledges or appreciates the sacrifices that she has made.

Despite circumstances of this kind, Maiguru takes refuge in her family, as does Mainini. Mainini chooses security rather than selfhood, as she resigns herself to 'carry[ing] her

burdens with strength' (16), living with a good-for-nothing man, and continuing the hard labour at the homestead, deriving security from a sense of place and belonging. This runs counter to certain aspects of traditional Anglo-American feminism, in terms of which the family is viewed as a site of oppression. In the light of this, Caroline White's discussion of women's situation in South Africa is also applicable to the women in Tambu's society. As White observes, traditional white Anglo-American feminists viewed the family in this way, in contrast to various black South African women, who have maintained that family 'is not a site of oppression, but is much desired and rarely achieved haven from the racist world outside' (1993:149). This is one reason why Maiguru returns to her home after temporarily abandoning it. It is also the reason why Mainini objects to Babamukuru taking her children away to educate them at the mission. However, while Mainini and Maiguru do acquire a sense of belonging and security from remaining in their families, we are nonetheless made aware of the extent to which their families represent a site of oppression in their lives, as is also the case with Nyasha, who is subjugated to Babamukuru's authoritarian rule. Also, Tambu initially perceives the oppressive side of her own family life, although she comes to value her family later on.

Tambu is someone who opts for self, even if possibly at great personal cost, because she challenges Babamukuru's authority when she informs him that she cannot attend her parents' wedding. This is a clear indication that she had opted for self, even though she takes a huge risk, because Babamukuru could make her lose that which she values highly: her education. She seeks to advance herself in life and attain self-actualization by acquiring an education which is also a form of security to her. Moreover, she could lose the security of life in his home. Yet Tambu refuses to give in, even when Babamukuru threatens her: 'He threatened all sorts of things, to stop buying clothes, to stop my school fees, to send me home, but it did not matter anymore. Babamukuru did not know I had suffered over the question of that wedding' (167).

Despite Babamukuru's threats to discontinue his contribution towards Tambu's empowerment, Tambu feels that if she submits to Babamukuru's authority and attends her parents' wedding, it will erode her capacity to attain the personal freedom that she seeks. On the other hand, her determination to stand up for what she believes is right will contribute to her personal empowerment in a more profound way. She is prepared to relinquish the

privileges that Babamukuru had bestowed upon her, choosing self rather than security, which is a major step in her development, and one of the principal factors leading to her personal empowerment. Although Babamukuru makes dreadful threats to frighten Tambu, she is not intimidated. Thus, she reaches a stage in her life where she realizes that happiness and personal fulfillment does not lie in material contentment, but in inner peace within oneself. This enables her to express herself freely, and not to compromise her needs and beliefs.

Babamukuru's disbelief is evident in the above extract, in that he cannot accept the fact that Tambu can defy his authority. He is angered by this, to the extent that he dehumanizes her, calling her an 'evil thing'. This also demonstrates a distinctive feature of patriarchy in this and many other societies, in that it cannot accept challenges, especially from women. This is emphasized by Babamukuru's use of 'my', showing his self-absorbed determination to maintain his patriarchal status and the extent to which his position as family patriarch has made him egocentric. However, Tambu chooses self over security and affirms her personal identity by expressing that in which she believes and not allowing others to brainwash her. Thus, she says later on: 'When I saw the [wedding] photographs I was sure that I should have gone. But I had not seen then before I had made my decision and the decision at least was mine' (168).

On the other hand, Nyasha, who is determined to express herself because she feels she has the right to speak out, illustrates the dangers of aspiring to selfhood. Her problems stem from the fact that, torn between two cultures, she lacks a sense of security and belonging that could empower her in her journey towards self-realization. She thus experiences an identity crisis of a kind, lacking a secure foundation upon which she can base her resistance to that which she perceives as oppressive in her family and her society. This hinders her from expressing herself effectively in her family and broader social context.

In Nyasha's case, it is apparent that, under certain circumstances, dangers can arise when one tries to be heard. When she attempts to do so, she has no established sense of self upon which to base her resistance. This gives rise to ongoing conflict both at an inner psychological and outward physical level, resulting in her bulimia and her eventual breakdown, expressive of her state of psychological distress. The difficulties Nyasha experiences are exacerbated by her conflict with her father, which she describes to Tambu, since she values her sympathetic

support. Here, we are made aware of another characteristic of patriarchy. As Nyasha's words to Tambu intimate (190), there is never a balance, for it is a one-way communication channel, and it always flows from the top to bottom. This is evident in the way Babamukuru never listens to Nyasha, because he thinks it is 'unwomanly' (113) for a female to speak out the way that she does. The novel indicates that, when one aspires for self it might not end up successfully, as it does for Tambu and Lucia, for the results may be disastrous, as is evident in Nyasha's case. To make Nyasha's situation worse, she indicates to Tambu, she is torn between pleasing her father, whom she loves, by being a dutiful African daughter, and her own need for self-expression and self-realization (190).

The above discussion shows the extent to which certain women give up all they have for the sake of security, and the risks that other women take when they choose selfhood instead. Therefore, the opportunities that are available for women to empower themselves will be explored in the next section, as will the reasons why some women are unable to attain empowerment.

### **Beating the Nervous Conditions: Possibilities of Empowerment**

In order for one to achieve a full sense of one's own individuality and attain self-realization, one has to 'beat' the 'nervous condition' which has been discussed earlier in this chapter. In one way or another, many of the characters in the novel have to overcome their personal 'nervous conditions' to attain empowerment. If they are not able to free themselves from the specific 'nervous condition' with which they are beset, the chances of attaining personal empowerment will be limited.

For instance, Babamukuru suffers from 'bad nerves' and this is indicative of the deep-seated 'nervous condition' from which he suffers. Many of the pressures and constraints to which he is subjected, directly or indirectly, are a result of colonialism. This undermines his sense of secure selfhood and his inner psychological balance, as well as the balance and harmony in his family.

Having noted how difficult it was for men, even those who were considered significant, to attain empowerment, (albeit within certain social constraints) it is then evident how much



harder it is for women in the text to break free from that which confines them. In various cases, this entails overcoming the particular 'nervous condition' from which they suffer, connected as these are to the forms of discrimination imposed on them. Various women in the story try to escape, but the methods which some of them try to employ turn out to be unsuccessful and self-destructive, as is evident in the case of Nyasha, whose rebellion is unsuccessful. Nyasha is unable to beat her 'nervous condition' because as we have already seen, she lacks the basic foundation upon which to base her resistance. She is more forceful, determined, more insightful and has more material and educational advantages than the other female characters in the novel, but still she fails to attain a sense of independent selfhood. Nyasha is unable to strike a balance between the two cultures between which she is caught and attain self-actualization, despite the fact that she seems to have so much potential for personal empowerment. She fails in her attempts to assert herself because she has many conflicting thoughts, feelings and parts of herself that she fails to integrate, which Maiguru describes as 'loose connections' (107). Ultimately, the nervous breakdown from which she suffers is indicative of the extent of her defeat.

Maiguru has to 'beat' her 'nervous condition' of being confined in her role as submissive, dutiful wife and mother but as we have seen, she chooses security over self. At one point, Maiguru strives for self-realization, but she fails because when she leaves her home she only seeks refuge in the house of another man, her brother, and eventually returns to her husband and to the security of domesticity. Nyasha comments on this saying 'Its such a waste. ... Imagine what she might have been with the right kind of exposure' (175). Although Maiguru returns home somewhat changed, she is unable to overcome her 'nervous condition' because she continues to be a 'good' submissive wife, at the cost of her own personal growth and confidence.

Mainini remains trapped for other reasons. Mainini's 'nervous condition' stem from poverty, but she is not able overcome this economic and material deprivation. She lacks the willpower to change her life, and she is also overwhelmed and exhausted by the burdens she has to carry. As result, she is reduced to a state of passivity. Instead, she laments on a great many of the obstacles that hinder a woman from attaining self-actualization, such as the weight of womanhood, interconnected with the poverty of blackness. As Berndt maintains, 'Mainini has long resigned to her fate and does little to change her circumstances and passively

endures her degrading circumstances' (92). Berndt goes on to assert that the nature of Mainini's life does not allow her sufficient space to reflect on anything other than her immediate situation, maintaining: 'Her daily tasks leave little space for recreation or philosophical reflections' (92). This is borne out by the fact that Mainini has resigned herself to her situation, indicating that she has reached a dead end, with nothing else to look forward to. The following description illustrates the way in which Mainini has decided to accept her lot and suppresses her own thoughts, feelings and desires: 'My mother, lips pressed tight, would hitch little Rambanai more securely on her back and continue silently at her labours. The ferocious swings of her arms as she grabbed and stripped a maize stalk restrained Netsai and me from making the slightest murmur of rebellion' (7).

It is clear from the above quotation that Mainini never gave herself the opportunity to think about her condition. Instead of asking why she is sidelined when Babamukuru comes to the homestead to make decisions that concern the whole family including herself, she resorts to repressing herself. As she continues to bear her burdens, she is unaware that she is passing on her attitude of passivity to her younger daughter, Netsai, thereby obstructing her chances of breaking free from situations that confine her. She does not offer hope to her daughters as she herself has lost it completely. Her words to Lucia are indicative of this, as she laments: [D]oes it matter what I want? Since when has it mattered what I want? (153). It transpires that Netsai is beginning to act in the same way, directing all her feelings and energies towards her work, instead of speaking out. Tambu notices this, observing:

Netsai turned on what I thought was an excessive amount of steam when mother grew silently ferocious. She would have outstripped me by an indecent number of yards, an embarrassingly high quota of cobs, if I hadn't been ashamed to lose face by letting my younger sister out-work me (8).

As a mother, Mainini is not an ideal role model for her daughters and this may make the possibility of empowerment for them difficult, as she is already familiarizing them with passivity and teaching them to endure oppression. Mainini's behaviour is similar to Auntie Nabou's in the way she endorses passivity in young Nabou.

In contrast to Mainini, Maiguru and Nyasha, Lucia and Tambu are the only women in the novel who have not yet become resigned to their fate and given up hope or been defeated in

their struggles for self-actualisation. Lucia strives to obtain what she wants and yet she also she adapts easily to changes in her environment. She is confident and is not intimidated by patriarchal systems of authority. Her independence and her free spirit enables her to express not only her thoughts and feelings but also her sexual desires openly. This is important, in that once a woman is able to accept who she is and does not allow external forces to influence the way she thinks and behaves, she has chances of attaining a sense of self-awareness that Mainini and various other women lack. According to Berndt, Lucia is able to achieve empowerment because 'her boldness might be rooted in the Zimbabwean landscape and the culture it engendered and connected with both, a rootedness in her own body' (101). Thus, Lucia not only has a connection with her roots, both in terms of her culture and traditions and the land to which she belongs, as does Tambu, but she also has the power to act on her physical desires and express herself freely and fully.

In contrast, the reason why Nyasha's rebellion is unsuccessful could be because she lacks this sense of belonging and rootedness. Thus she fails to attain a sense of full selfhood that could enable her to attain personal empowerment. Meanwhile, Lucia is able to go beyond gender stereotypes, in terms of which women are expected to be mothers and take care of their husbands and children. She refuses to be controlled by men, but she makes use of them when she needs them, saying: 'A woman has to live with something, even if it is only a cockroach. And cockroaches are better. They are easy to chase away, isn't it?' (153). As this indicates, she does not allow anyone, least of all a man, to tell her what she ought to do.

As a result of the extent to which Lucia is not ashamed of expressing her physical and sexual desires, she is not ashamed of falling pregnant. Even though Mainini rarely speaks for herself, she does not object to her sister's pregnancy, voicing her support for her sister when the family council, consisting of the men of the family, seeks to pass judgement on her for her behaviour (136). It can be that Mainini admires Lucia's independence and her capacity for self-assertion, which she knows she does not possess. As Lucia moves on, building a life of her own, she refuses to be entrapped by stereotypical gender roles that require her to be a submissive traditional mother and wife.

As further proof of her strong sense of selfhood, Lucia gives Babamukuru the impression that she respects his wishes, while also challenging his authority on occasions. Thus, she manages

to cajole Babamukuru, who is regarded as a godlike figure by his family, into supporting her ideas and finding her a job which liberates her from depending on the patriarchy. She knows that Babamukuru is eager to strengthen his position as head of the family, therefore when she needs his assistance she does not question his authority, thereby furthering her own goals. Through this, she manages to cajole Babamukuru into getting her a job, so that she can be financially stable and self-sufficient. While Nyasha thinks that she is compromising herself, Lucia has a different way of viewing things from other women in her society, such as Mainini, Maiguru and even Nyasha, maintaining that one can borrow from various cultures whenever it is possible and convenient for one's own sake. This she does by drawing on potentially useful aspects of western culture, such as education, while 'borrowing' models of female subservience temporarily from Shona culture to further her own aims. Consequently she says, 'Babamukuru wanted to be asked, so I asked. And now we both have what we wanted, isn't it?' (160). Lucia further empowers herself by deciding to acquire an education and in this way, she becomes an independent woman who is able to advance herself in life to an extent. Then, her decision to acquire an education will carry her further away from poverty and oppression.

Bearing in mind the contention by Frank and Umeh that it may not be possible for women in this society to break free from forms of oppression which confine them within Shona tradition and colonial forms of authority and control, it is that, like Lucia, Tambu manages to be one of the characters who achieve empowerment. They both realize that the only way they can escape from their poverty is through education. For instance, Tambu demonstrates that her opportunity to acquire education enables her to escape from extreme poverty and break out of the socially-imposed silence of her earlier life, but most importantly she perceives it as her path to personal empowerment. For Tambu, this seems to be an almost impossible feat at first, but when Babamukuru undertakes to provide her with a good education, nothing can stop Tambu from embracing the opportunity with both hands.

At first Tambu is quite content to be a meek and obedient female after she moves to Babamukuru's home, although later on she takes a significant step in growth towards empowerment when she starts questioning Babamukuru's authority. But initially, in her excitement at this change in her life, it does not matter to her that she is moving from her father's control to another man's control. Tambu also believes that the only possible way to

escape from her degrading life of poverty and limited opportunities is through leaving everything that had to do with life back at the homestead and concentrate on equipping herself for the future.

However, later on Tambu realizes that it is important to strike a balance between the choices she makes and her own culture. It becomes evident that if she chooses to be different, by separating herself entirely from her own culture and people, she might become a misfit and have nothing to sustain her in arduous times, and risk deep psychological damage, as is the case with Nyasha, who has nothing stable to rely on, except Tambu's friendship. As a result, Tambu comes to understand the importance of her family and thus she pays heed to her mother's words that if she is not careful the 'Englishness' (203) will get the better of her, exposing her to the above-outlined risks. Hence, she says: 'I was not like Nyasha, who could forget where she was so entirely that she could do whatever she fancied and as a result did it well. I was always aware of my surroundings' (110). Thus, Tambu retains an awareness of her roots, and she is also mindful of the way in which other environments she inhabits may differ both in constructive and potentially harmful ways.

Another reason why Tambu is able to achieve empowerment is her relationship with her grandmother and, in certain respects, her bond with her mother. Khani Begum comments on this: 'Drawing strength from her matrilineal links, Tambu understands herself through their struggles and triumphs' (1993:27). Tambu identifies with the stories that her grandmother tells her which offer her insight into racial oppression and effects of colonialism. She also acquires important support from her grandmother who teaches her how to cultivate crops, so she is able to grow mealies to sell and raise her funds for school fees later. Moreover, Tambu initially questions some of her mother's views when she tries to discourage her from wanting to attend school, and when she tells her that womanhood is a burden she will have to bear (17). So it is only later that she learns to value her mother's wisdom (203). Even though Tambu's mother is against the idea of her daughter attending The Sacred Heart Convent, she performs a valuable role, when she warns her daughter to be wary of assimilation. In the light of that which Tambu has witnessed in the lives of some of those around her, such as Nyasha and Babamukuru, who have fallen prey to the dangers of assimilation, her mother's warning helps develop a sense of solidarity between them. It also deepens Tambu's respect for her mother's values and her wisdom (203). It is possibly that when Mainini acknowledges her

daughter's strong will to achieve more in life than she had done, she also encourages her to tread carefully. This bears out bell hook's observation that 'women need to have the experiences of working through hostility to arrive at understanding and solidarity' (63).

Although Nyasha fails in her battle against the patriarchal system, her rebellious behaviour influences Tambu to some extent, in that it opens her eyes to certain issues in her society of which she was unaware. Thus she helps her to develop the capacity to question and challenge such situations. As a result, Tambu acknowledges that she admires Nyasha's perceptiveness, which expands her mental horizons and sharpens her critical faculties (89). Nyasha acts as a catalyst to Tambu's development in that she helps her to develop a more critical and inquiring mind. On the other hand, Nyasha significantly derives support from Tambu's friendship, so when Tambu goes to boarding school she is left empty with no one to 'bridge the gaps in her life'(196). Her failure to attain personal fulfillment and a sense of independent selfhood stems from this in significant respects.

Unlike Nyasha, Tambu retains her sense of rootedness in her Shona culture and this leaves her with a sense of belonging. This is reinforced by her connection with the countryside, as she wonders why her brother used to hate walking in the countryside which she describes as refreshing (2 – 3). Her love of the river near her home and her regular visits to the homestead help her retain her links with her people and her land. Other characters like Nyasha, Chido and to an extent, Babamukuru lack this sense of connectedness to their land, and this contributes to their identity crises. Berndt concurs with this noting that, like Lucia, Tambu's connection with the countryside of which she often speak helps her to acquire a sense of strength and stability:

[The landscape] remains a source of strength and security in Tambudzai's life. The importance of this is especially highlighted by the fact that the other characters lack this feeling of safety. Some of Tambudzai's family members have lost their connection to the rural landscape and, therewith, the rootedness it can provide (91).

However, it should be noted that as Tambu continues her journey for self-realization, she does not find the journey a straightforward path on account of the fact that education, her chosen path to personal empowerment, has various problematic aspects. Tambu's awareness of these features of her education is illustrated when she commences her studies at the Sacred

Heart and later on, after she completes her education (203). At this stage, Tambu realizes that the education she receives is highly ambiguous, but she is also aware that there are very limited ways in which women can escape from that which constrains and confines them if they are not educated, and many of these ways are too hard for most women. However, she learns that colonial education restricts those who receive it in certain respects, while indoctrinating them in the ways of colonialism. Nyasha is aware of this, drawing Tambu's attention to the way in which education can function as a form of assimilation (179). In the end, Tambu discovers this, but is able to move ahead with her life, 'refus[ing] to be brainwashed' although she acknowledges that it [the process of expansion] is a 'long painful process' (204). In this way, Tambu is made aware that education is not necessarily a passport to an easier, happier life or to freedom. She learns, for instance that the Western colonial education that Nyasha receives hampers her capacity for self-actualisation and personal empowerment.

Bearing in mind the problematic nature of education in colonial Rhodesian society, and the limited access that women have to education, sometimes speaking out may be the only option. Lucia does a great deal to demonstrate the point that it is possible for one to escape even if one is not educated by speaking out. On the other hand, in Maiguru's case it can be extremely difficult to speak out even if one is educated. Tambu discovers this, but she realizes that it was more comforting to speak out and also better for an individual's psychological well-being and personal growth. She realizes this particularly when Babamukuru punishes her for refusing to go to her parents' wedding, as she says 'I went about these chores grimly, with a deep and grateful masochistic delight: to me that punishment was the price of my newly acquired identity' (169). Nonetheless, the dangers of speaking out, which could result in experiencing a psychic split, like the one with which Nyasha is afflicted, is illustrated by Tambu's words: '[Babamukuru] did not know how my mind had raced and spun and ended up splitting into two disconnected entities that had long, frightening arguments with each other, very vocally in my head' (167). We see that Tambu is able to resolve this by taking a firm decision based on her own sense of who she is and where she belongs.

Despite the threats Babamukuru levels against her, Tambu feels empowered from within; because she knows she has taken a significant step in terms of her own self-actualization in

deciding not to go to the wedding. This shows that Tambu knows the only way to break free from the turmoil inside her is by speaking out, and this is what she did and she felt relieved. It is also evident that speaking out does not come easily, there are many risks and much pain involved, so Tambu is courageous. At this stage, Tambu manages to speak for herself, showing that she has learnt to trust her own judgement and not allow men around her to make decisions for her, and although it makes Babamukuru angry, she does achieve something greater inside. Tambu feels that the wedding makes a mockery of her people and her own culture. Thus, by refusing to attend it, she affirms her sense of rootedness in and belonging to her people and her place, which provides her with a solid and stable point from which she can grow.

As this indicates, speaking out can be a powerful weapon for women such as Tambu, in that it offers a sense of inner peace that comes from within. When a woman speaks out, she expresses her feelings and makes her desires known. This may prevent her from being treated in a manner that she does not desire. For instance, if Mainini had firmly stated that she did not like the idea of a wedding, the wedding would not have taken place, but she never tries to do so, on account of her disempowered, defeated nature. For her part, Maiguru eventually attempts to change her situation by finally objecting to the way in which Babamukuru treats her, saying: '[W]hen I keep quiet you think I am enjoying it. So today I am telling you I am not happy. I am not happy any more in this home' (172). She also describes how she resents her husband's lavish support of his brother's family, partly from her wages. saying: 'I am tired of my house being a hotel for your family. I am tired of being nothing in a home I am working myself sick to support' (172).

Babamukuru has been depriving Maiguru of a voice, but at this stage Maiguru finds her voice, albeit only to a limited extent, stating that she is not happy (172). When Maiguru speaks out, she leaves her home temporarily, and returns a changed person more 'able to talk about sensible things' (175). Broekman discusses the way this manifests itself, stating that Maiguru has managed to prove that she is not utterly helpless in her situation, because she forces Babamukuru to demonstrate his appreciation and need for by coming to fetch her home (1999: 29). The extent to which she changes is further revealed in that Maiguru is able to express her own feelings about women and education and is able to override



Babamukuru's objections that the Sacred Heart Convent will not be good for Tambu, thereby enabling Tambu to continue her education there.

Lucia is another female character who shows that speaking can be a powerful tool towards acquiring self-realization. She is a clever woman who refuses to be bound by traditional patriarchal norms that seek to demean her. As a result, Lucia becomes a strong figure from whom Tambu draws the courage that she looks for in a mother but fails to receive. Lucia demonstrates that it is possible for a woman to stand up for what she believes in and not let male authority figures dictate how she should live her life. Her ability to challenge a patriarchal *dare*, which is only a gathering for the male members of the family and patriarchal aunts, shows that she is strong-willed. She strides in, disrupting the gathering, attacking Takesure and speaking fearlessly: 'Tell me, Babamukuru, would you say this is a man? Can a man talk such nonsense? ... Takesure, have you ever seen me riding a hyena's back?... Answer me' (144). Lucia empowers herself further, by speaking for herself instead of succumbing to shock and horror over the allegations made by Takesure that she is a witch. Such allegations are very serious in African countries, but many women in diverse African societies might lack the courage to repudiate them in this way, consequently suffering the consequences. In the above extract, Lucia speaks her mind to Babamukuru and talks to him at will without fear.

In her capacity for fearless self-assertion, among much else Lucia is an inspiration not only to Tambu who needs such encouragement in her own journey to self-realization, but also to the women of the Sigauke family who are bound by their status as wives and mothers, to the extent that they are incapable of voicing their concerns. Although these women may be disempowered in this respect, Lucia offers them glimpses of other ways of being which can be related to Walker's ideas of womanism; the ability to be audacious and strong-willed, as discussed at the outset of the chapter. Her strength awakens a kind of sisterly solidarity, and they all admire her fearless conduct, as shown in the conversation between Tete and Maiguru: 'That Lucia! Aiwa! That Lucia is mad. And Mukoma's [Babamukuru's] face! Truly you'd have thought that Lucia walked in naked'. Then Maiguru responds: 'They shouldn't meddle with women like Lucia!' At which point, Tambu tells us, 'they puckered their faces up and dissolved into helpless giggles' (148). Their laughter is indicative of the way in which they feel able to ridicule patriarchal authority. Tete, a matriarchal aunt, cannot find words with

which to describe Lucia's audacity, thus she only says: 'That Lucia!' Tete notices the expression of alarm on Babamukuru's face, she also indicates that Babamukuru felt the impact of Lucia's challenge, for he could not have imagined that Lucia would challenge him and other members of the *dare* in this way. Berndt comments on this, observing:

Lucia manages to rouse solidarity among the women of the Sigauke clan who, too afraid to openly criticize their men themselves, gratefully take the chance to watch Lucia confronting them. They observe with awe her undaunted standing up for her rights, and they are pleased by the irritation on their men's faces (101).

[H]ooks discusses the value of sisterly bonding of this kind, especially in situations as this one, in which the female protagonists do not always share the same views, saying that 'women need to come together in situations where there will be ideological disagreement and work to change that interaction so communication occurs' (63). This is also evident in the valuable role that women such as her grandmother and her mother play in Tambu's life.

The point by hooks can be related to the situation above, in that Lucia differs in many respects from the other women, who do not share her views of men or her attitude to life. Nonetheless, she inspires and delights them, resulting in sisterly bonding of this kind, and the women are able to communicate with one another in a way they are rarely able to do. Although this temporary solidarity brings some merriment amongst the women, and is inspirational, to a certain extent, it is not enough to empower women such as Mainini, and to enable them to free themselves from their degrading positions. In conclusion, temporary solidarity of this kind is not sufficient in societies such as the one in *Nervous Conditions*. Therefore, women need to bear this important point in their minds in their journeys towards personal empowerment.

We can reflect on Nyasha's words to Tambu: 'You have to keep moving,' she said. Getting involved in this and that, finding out one thing and another. Moving, all the time. Otherwise you get trapped' (96). This suggests that life is a constant process of discovery, exploring new possibilities, being open to new experiences and forms of knowledge that could assist personal growth, which Tambu manages to accomplish. Nyasha's words also indicate that it is important to be active and seeking to shape one's own life, and not become passive victims of circumstances or be deterred by obstacles. Although Nyasha herself does not succeed in

her endeavor for individuality, it is necessary that black African women follow her advice, in order to attain a sense of hope and self-actualization. As black women we need to keep moving, in order to attain that which is fulfilling to us.

## CONCLUSION

The three novels analyzed in this study cast much light on the situations of various women in diverse parts of Africa, depicting the ways in which they are oppressed as a result of gender, and describing the extent to which they are able to empower themselves. This concluding section compares and contrasts the ways in which this takes place in these three primary texts. In this respect, it is worth bearing in mind Tambu's observation in *Nervous Conditions* after the conflict which results in a fight between Nyasha and Babamukuru. Tambu reflects:

[H]ow dreadfully familiar that scene had been, with Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I had felt victimized at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew maize. The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them... . And that was the problem... . But what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (115-116).

Tambu's observation suggests many women in her society are oppressed because of their 'femaleness'. This is also applicable not only to women in her society, but also to the women in the African societies depicted in the other two primary texts, in various respects. Despite the differences in their situations, even those who are more advantaged, as a result of the opportunities available to them (such as Tambu) or their position of relative economic security and close relationships from which they can draw support (as, for instance, in Rama's case) are not exempted from experiencing gender-related suffering. For example, in all three novels, despite the different contexts within which they are set, oppressive traditional customs are used to condone and perpetuate patriarchal oppression, and this bears out Tambu's observation that 'men took it everywhere with them'. It is worth noting that some of the forms of oppression which various women in the primary texts experience relate in certain respects to traditional practices and cultural norms that serve men's interests.

In *So Long a Letter*, women are faced with sufferings related to polygamy, and various cultural practices associated with it, which demean them. Women are not consulted by their husbands when they decide to take second wives. In part, they may do so because polygamy is regarded as a 'manly' characteristic in various other African societies, including their own.

For instance, Modou and Mawdo's behavior is indicative of this, as is Nnaife's behaviour in *The Joys of Motherhood*. In *Nervous Conditions*, Jeremiah would have liked to have taken Lucia as a second wife, had it not been for that fact that Babamukuru would have forbidden it. Both Bâ's and Emecheta's novels highlight the fact that the practice of polygamy enables men to oppress beautiful young girls who cannot make decisions on their own, by taking them as additional wives, thereby robbing them of the possibility of a bright future. This is evident in *So Long a Letter* when Modou marries the youthful, attractive Binetou and Mawdo weds young Nabou whom he cannot resist because of her physical appearance. Nnaife in *The Joys of Motherhood* also marries a lovely young woman, Okpo.

Like Binetou and young Nabou, Okpo has her future decided for her by patriarchal authority figures. Apart from polygamy, there are other ways in which patriarchal attitudes manifest themselves. For instance, there is selfishness and authoritarianism, as in the way Babamukuru behaves in *Nervous Conditions*, which is not in his family's interests or even his own. Moreover, men can also develop an inflated sense of their own importance. For instance, Nnaife treats Nnu Ego in a selfish, callous way for these reasons, feeling that this is acceptable masculine behavior. Furthermore, Rama is informed of her husband's decision to take another wife in an insensitive, offhand way, since men in her society believe that it is not necessary to take women's feelings into account. In all these instances, men are allowed to behave in accordance with their selfish opinions and desires whilst women experience various forms of psychological suffering. For instance, Rama wonders why Modou has abandoned her in the way that he did, concluding that it might have been due to her physical appearance. This makes her heartbroken and she feels betrayed. Aissatou suffers a similar form of shock and betrayal for, like Rama, she thought that her relationship had a strong foundation. Then, Nnu Ego feels devastated and humiliated when Nnaife takes on another wife, although he can barely meet the economic needs of his family. In *Nervous Conditions*, Mainini's furious outburst is expressive of her anger and pain when Jeremiah has an affair with Lucia.

Some of the women in the primary texts also experience forms of male violence and abuse, which may vary according to their situations. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego suffers verbal and psychological abuse from her first husband, Amatokwu, when she fails to conceive. Life with her second husband is not markedly different, as Nnaife also inflicts pain

and suffering upon her through verbal and psychological abuse. Moreover, she even experiences a type of physical abuse when Nnaife tries to beat her, only escaping by running away. In *Nervous Conditions*, Nyasha experiences both verbal and physical abuse from her father, mainly because she is caught between two cultures and cannot become the submissive, obedient daughter he requires her to be. Aissatou and Rama experience psychological abuse as a result of the way they are treated by the men that they love; and Mainini and Nnu Ego experience this too as they are treated in a selfish, insensitive way by the men in their lives. This kind of abuse stems from the way in which women are denigrated and devalued. Moreover, they are deprived of opportunities in life as a result of this. This is particularly evident in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Nervous Conditions*, in which the sole purpose of a girl's life is to make life better for the male child or her husband and family. It is the girl child who is expected to give up her opportunity to acquire education in times of economic hardship, or to work to raise funds which will benefit the male child. For instance, Nnu Ego's daughters have to start selling firewood so that her two sons can continue with their education. This is also the case in *Nervous Conditions*, in which Tambu has to discontinue her education because there is insufficient money for both her and her brother's school fees.

Further to this, young women are not only deprived of education for economic reasons but also because they are expected to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers. In various respects this is evident in all the three primary texts. For example in *So Long a Letter*, Binetou and young Nabou are deprived of education in order to fulfill their roles as wives; while in *The Joys of Motherhood* Kehinde and Taiwo are told not worry about education because they will soon be wives and mothers. This is indicative of the extent to which young women in this and other societies in the primary texts are viewed as destined for marriage. Then, in the society in *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's own desire for an education is viewed as relatively unimportant because she is destined to be a wife and mother, so her education is deemed to be of little benefit to her family. As this indicates, women are not accorded the right to independent selfhood and neither are they granted the space to express their own needs and desires. Thus, they exist primarily in relation to men, as is evident in the way Nnu Ego worries what people will think of her if she is not a 'good' wife and mother. Moreover, the way in which girls are devalued is portrayed in Nnu Ego's insatiable desire to give birth to sons, and also in the extent to which Babamukuru castigates and disciplines Nyasha while Chido is allowed independence.

The influence that women have on each other in these texts is also noteworthy. Relegated to inferior positions, undermined and worn down, women unthinkingly perpetuate the very forms of oppression that have been imposed on them. They are subjugated to such an extent that they internalize their own oppression and believe it is their duty to impose these oppressive norms and practices on younger women. This is indicative of the extent to which various women are conditioned into submissiveness within patriarchal societies. For instance, in *So Long a Letter*, there are women who perpetuate the oppression of women, such as Aunt Nabou, who deprives Nabou of formal education and trains her to be a submissive wife, whilst Binetou is pushed into an early marriage as a result of her mother's greed.

Farmata also encourages Rama to be a docile woman, despite the fact that behavior of this kind would not be in her interests. In *Nervous Conditions*, Mainini does not encourage Tambu to move forward in life by continuing her education, but encourages her to accept her inferior position and 'to carry her burdens with strength'. This is also the message Nnu Ego passes on to her daughters in *The Joys of Motherhood*, because she herself is defeated and only makes her daughters aware of the downtrodden, disempowered female conduct. Thus, she is not an effective role model.

Another form of oppression experienced by various women in each of the primary texts relates to the way in which they are treated as possessions with no feelings or desires of their own, incapable of making their own decisions and existing primarily to serve the men in their lives and the needs of their families. As a result of attitudes of this nature, their hard work is barely recognized. For instance, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnaife abandons his role as principal breadwinner, so Nnu Ego takes over this task and this entails a great physical and psychological hardship. Yet, however much the women contribute, their labours are taken for granted and the credit is given to men. For example, Rama works hard, contributing significantly to her family's financial and material needs, but she is humiliated in the end when her husband discards her, marrying a younger beautiful wife. Nnu Ego labours so hard that she barely rests, but this is not acknowledged and she goes to her grave without peace. Then, Maiguru is more educated than her husband and her salary helps Babamukuru to maintain his eminent status, but no one ever mentions her contribution. As a result of attitudes of this kind, some women become viewed as commodities, existing to further the

interests of others. This is particularly evident in *So Long a Letter*, in which young girls are used to enrich their parents' position, as is apparent in both Young Nabou and Binetou's cases.

Further to this, the fact that women are silenced in various respects furthers views of this nature and this diminishes their sense of selfhood. This exacerbates the extent to which women are viewed as potentially income-generating assets, as is evident in Binetou and Young Nabou's situations. Thus, various women in the primary texts are made to feel as if they are devoid of independent selfhood, existing primarily in relation to the men around them, as wives, mothers, daughters and sisters. The fact that many women are silenced is also indicative of the way women have repressed themselves by suppressing their own feelings and desires. Rama draws attention to this, describing how she only manages to find her own voice after thirty years. Nnu Ego also silences herself in that she feels incapable of self-expression, which indicates the extent to which she feels that, as a woman, she does not have the right to express her own needs and desires. For her part, Maiguru only manages to speak out temporarily against the unjust, authoritarian behaviour of the men in her life, without achieving any significant results. Thereafter these women fall back into their comfort zones as wives and mothers. On the other hand, Nyasha speaks out, but her voice is not heard. Meanwhile, Aissatou speaks out powerfully, for instance, in her letter to Mawdo, as does Rama, who expresses herself fully and freely in her letter. Tambu speaks out as well, expressing her feelings about her parents' white wedding to Babamukuru, thereby acquiring a sense of individual fulfillment. Lucia also expresses her feelings because she does not allow herself to be bound by patriarchal constraints.

One particularly significant form of oppression related to the aforementioned examples of subjugation is the extent to which women may suffer from varying degrees of interconnected race, class and gender oppression. In *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Nervous Conditions* for instance, it is very evident that economic oppression some of which is class-related, and racial subjugation stemming from colonialism intensify the sufferings of women, aggravating the forms of gender oppression with which they are beset. Moreover, in these two texts, we are made aware that men also suffer as a result of these factors too. Thus, the concerns of African and African-American feminist and womanist theoretical approaches equip us with insights into not only the situations of the African women in the primary texts, but also into



those of some of their men. Although there are no distinctive forms of colonial oppression in *So Long a Letter*, there are forms of interwoven gender and class oppression at work, as is evident in the case of Binetou who is compelled to marry a wealthy man, and also as a result of these factors, Aissatou's mother-in-law finds a new wife from a superior social class for her son.

Farmata's assertion that a woman is like a ball highlights the extent to which various women in the three primary texts are undermined and disempowered. She contends that a woman is like a ball, which has no control over who kicks it and the direction into which it is kicked. The possibilities of empowerment in the three primary texts will now be compared and contrasted in the light of this. Perceptions such as Farmata's feature to a certain extent and in various respects in the other two primary texts. Among much else, they give rise to and reinforce various related forms of oppression, a number of which have been discussed above. Nonetheless, in *So Long a Letter*, Rama manages to endure and overcome her humiliation when her husband marries a second wife without her knowledge. Although she is shocked, she maintains her dignity, and triumphs over the obstacles with which she is beset. She is able to develop a sense of independent selfhood, while drawing from her culture that which helps her to move on with her life and remaining married to her husband for this reason. Culture and tradition play a significant role in women's lives. Although these hold them back in some significant respects, giving rise to various forms of patriarchal oppression, they can also empower women. For instance, some women's sense of connectedness to their families, their communities and their land relates in part to aspects of culture and tradition. In various respects, this applies to Tambu and Lucia, and, to an extent, to Rama. In contrast, Nyasha is defeated in her struggle for independence, because she lacks a sense of rootedness in her people and culture from which she can draw strength. On the other hand, the damaging effects of tradition are emphasized in *The Joys of Motherhood*. We are presented with Nnu Ego whose world view and way of life is very much shaped by traditional norms and practices, yet she does not succeed in attaining personal fulfillment particularly on account of the role tradition plays in her life. Even though she abides by the rules, as a 'good' African woman, who bears many children, including highly valued sons, she fails to live her own life to the full and is oppressed as a result of her gender. Meanwhile, Tambu, in *Nervous Conditions*, is a young woman who is also beset by a number of obstacles that could hinder her personal fulfillment. However, she is aware of that which she must conquer, and with the

help of those around her she embarks successfully on her journey to personal fulfillment. Moreover, Tambu is able to identify the damaging aspects of tradition and resists them in her own life. This is evident, for instance, in her reflections cited at the beginning of this chapter.

Another important factor is worth considering here. Tambu manages to draw advice from those around her and establishes relationships which assist her, in her journey towards maturity and personal empowerment. This highlights the importance of bonds between women, as Tambu has a close relationship with her grandmother, from whom she learns important aspects of her family history. Tambu also learns to respect her mother's wisdom towards the end of the book, while her bond with Nyasha contributes to her development. For instance, as a result of Nyasha's influence, she learns to think more critically. Meanwhile, Rama's friendship with Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* provides her with support in difficult times and strengthens her, as she finds a voice of her own and acquires a sense of independent selfhood. It is significant to note that these and other forms of empowerment are connected to the way women draw strength from one another sustaining each other in difficult times. For instance, Rama draws strength from Aissatou, Tambu from Nyasha; Tambu from her mother and grandmother; Mainini from Lucia. Although Mainini simply lacks emotional and psychic energy, and perceives herself as downtrodden and disempowered, she temporarily derives significant support from Lucia who enables her to emerge from a nervous breakdown. On the other hand, women's inability to attain empowerment can be related, to a certain extent, to the lack of such bonds. For instance, Nnu Ego invests so much in motherhood such that she forgets to build a social life of her own and this results in her lonely sad death; whilst Nyasha suffers a nervous breakdown when she is separated from Tambu after she goes to boarding school. Comparably, other women such as young Nabou and Binetou in *So Long a Letter* do not attain empowerment because they lack positive bonds with other women. Instead, older women around them reinforce their oppression by pushing them into early marriages.

There are other factors that that can significantly affect women's capacities to develop a sense of independent selfhood such as education, can play an ambiguous role. On one hand, it can play a vital part in enabling women to attain self-expression and find their own voices, as is evident in Tambu and Lucia's instances. In Tambu's case, however, education is not only a source of empowerment but also, potentially, an obstacle in her path to empowerment. Thus,

we see how western colonial education can hinder empowerment in certain respects, for instance, in Nyasha's case. Moreover, although education is a tool meant to enlighten and change the perceptions of people, Emecheta demonstrates that even education cannot change the selfishness in some men. For example, Oshia, Nnu Ego's first son whom she toils so much to educate, never turns back to pull out his family from poverty, but goes on enrich himself only. Thus, Emecheta observes: 'I very much want to further the education of women in Africa, because I know that education really helps women. It is true that if one educates a woman, one educates a community, whereas if one educates a man, one educates a man' (553). Nnu Ego's life might have been better and she might have gone further in life if she had a chance to acquire an education.

In the light of issues such as these, the extent to which the various texts contain possibilities for empowerment will now be discussed. *So Long a Letter* is a text that offers us the greatest vision of hope, as we see Rama embarking successfully on her journey towards individual fulfillment. Aissatou also manages to triumph over her circumstances by choosing to leave a polygamous marriage and starting a life of her own. Then, in *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu makes us aware that one has to be careful not to compromise one's sense of identity, and not choose security over self. Moreover, she demonstrates the way in which deriving support from those around may help in creating a stable foundation for one's personal development. Next, although Tambu has overcome many obstacles in her way and acquires inner strength and a strong sense of independent selfhood, she states that her journey to adulthood was a difficult and painful process, and we are made aware that not all the other women in *Nervous Conditions* are able to escape forms of entrapment. This is taken further in *The Joys of Motherhood*, which contains the bleakest vision of women's possibilities for empowerment, as we notice that Nnu Ego does not attain self-actualisation because of the societal and patriarchal pressures around her, exacerbated by economic and political factors.

The issues discussed here and in the rest of the study highlight the fact that African women are 'crying' in various ways from different places. Sometimes women are able to speak out effectively, 'crying' out in a self-aware and powerful way. On other occasions, they utter a 'cry' of pain, as evident in Nnu Ego's words: 'God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?' (209). As these three writers illustrate, there is need for some problematic features of our traditional cultures and

other damaging factors at work in our societies that need to be reorganized. As African women, we are pregnant with ideas and plans that can contribute to our own personal empowerment and to the development of our societies, but as is evident in the study, in some of our societies the conditions do not permit us to give birth to them. Moreover, we may also be held back by aspects of our own natures. Therefore, we continue to be deprived of opportunities of empowerment. However, we also need to come together and address these issues so that we can move on with lives without fear of the 'entrapment' of which Nyasha speaks.

In order for women to attain self-actualization and fulfillment, there is need for a balanced society in which understanding and harmony prevails, as is evident in the womanist vision in *So Long a Letter*. In this text, Rama moves forward with her life and also the way she attains personal empowerment is inspirational, giving hope to the female reader in a comparable situation that her future and also the futures of other women confronting similar obstacles will be better ones. Womanism offers visionary qualities in the way in which it holds out a sense of hope and a vision of women's capacities for empowerment; as well as faith in the possibility of harmony, wholeness and healing at an individual and family level, and within the broader social context. However, feminist concerns come to the fore in *The Joys of Motherhood*. This is evident, for instance in the way in which Emecheta treats her male characters. There are fewer possibilities for harmony between men and women, and also the fact that Emecheta's female principal characters are unable to attain significant empowerment has a damaging effect the relationships between men and women. Both *Nervous Conditions* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, are feminist in the way they draw attention to the forms of oppression with which women are beset. However, on one hand, *The Joys of Motherhood* indicates the limitations of certain types of feminist perspectives in its extensive, harsh critique of patriarchy which results in a bleak vision, offering no way forward for its female protagonists. Meanwhile, *Nervous Conditions* offers us insight into ways in which womanist and feminist perspectives can be usefully combined. The novel contains some sympathetic insight into certain men's lives. For instance, this is evident in the case of Babamukuru. The novel also focuses on self-actualisation and has a visionary potential, thus highlighting womanist concerns.

All in all, the three books in this study offer us various insights into the lives of African women, focusing on both the forms of oppression they experience and the possibilities for empowerment available to them. Thus, they have the potential to contribute to the wider empowerment of African women, offering them insight into forms of oppression with which they or other African women may be beset and inspiring them to strive for empowerment. In this way, they encourage them to '[take] up the drum and [beat] along', as one of the pioneers of African women's literature, Ama Ata Aidoo, has said:

The women's movement has definitely reinforced one's conviction about the need for us to push in whatever way we can for the development of women. But I don't think that one woke up one morning and found that they were talking about the development of women, and one should also join the band wagon - no. What it has done is that it has actually confirmed one's belief and one's conviction. Our people say that if you take up a drum to beat and nobody joins then you just become a fool. The women's movement has helped in that it is like other people taking up the drum and beating along with you (cited in James: 21).

The war for women's empowerment is still far from over, because, as we have seen in this study, many women in various parts of Africa have been and continue to be oppressed. Therefore, they still need to be made aware of the forms of oppression which may beset them, both overt and subtle. Although it has been said that the path to women's movement has already been trodden, the need for more women to '[take] up the drum and [beat]' along is still necessary, so that the work of those who began beating the drum may not be futile. Bâ, Emecheta and Dangarembga have played valuable roles as leading African women writers as they challenge gender stereotypes previously prevalent in African literature. They also offer us insights into various African women's lives and inspire women, showing them ways forward, while warning them to guard against that which may entrap them. There is still need for us women to keep '[pushing] in whatever way we can for the development for women'. A study of this nature draws attention to the need for women's empowerment and thus, in carrying out this study, I have joined in with my rhythm to a beat that is already in progress, thus 'beating along with [others]'. Moreover, the study of these three primary texts has offered me a more indepth understanding of obstacles that may lie in the way of many African women and that which may strengthen them in their journeys towards empowerment. Further to this, Aidoo makes another assertion that concurs with the conviction expressed by one of Dangarembga's central protagonists, Nyasha. On account of her perceptive and far-seeing nature, she expresses various valuable insights in the course of the book, some of

which the women around her, as well as her female readers, would do well to heed. In their different ways, both Nyasha and Aidoo emphasize that we women must keep on moving. For her part, Aidoo has this to say:

No matter what the obstacles, what the problems, we must still go on writing. Or practicing any of our arts, or paying attention to of the things we are doing, not just writers anybody. We have to keep on going because it is only in terms of execution, in terms of working out our commitment and living fully that even on the individual level, and certainly collectively as a people, we will survive (James: 26).

Women should not be hindered in their efforts to attain empowerment. The drum must keep on beating until we are satisfied from within, because social transformation is not possible until individual transformation first takes place.

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