

Geography of Anxiety: Narrating Childhood and Resisting Familial Order in Recent Nigerian Women's Writing

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Abstract

*The thrust of this paper is not a strict feminist reading of texts that form the basis for textual analyses, yet it seeks to appraise the text within the feminist context since the novels are women-centred and explore women's experience in both the traditional and contemporary societies. The paper argues that *Purple Hibiscus* and *Sky-High Flames* are a continuation of and a challenge of the popular theme in African women's writing, which dramatizes how African women traverse their burdens -the challenges of tradition and modernity, thereby foregrounding the changing idea of marriage and motherhood. Both texts are set in different context and locales but deal with the realities of the asymmetric gender geometry, most especially in the matrimonial enterprise. In order to articulate the artistic intensions of these new African writers, the discourse appraises how the female protagonists in these novels rescind orthodoxy in order to resuscitate the receding voice of the marginalized mothers. This is achieved through different rebellious stratagem the protagonists employ to rebel against patriarchy in order to construct their own self-identity.*

Key words: Patriarchy, Motherhood, Awakening, Gender, Self-identity.

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The thrust of this discourse is not a strict feminist reading of texts that form the basis for textual analyses, yet it seeks to appraise the text within the feminist context since the novels are women-centred and explore women's experiences in both the traditional and contemporary societies. The paper argues that *Purple Hibiscus* and *Sky-High Flames* are though, a continuation of and a challenge of the popular theme in African women's writing, which dramatizes how the African woman traverses her burdens -negotiating the challenges of tradition and modernity, thereby foregrounding the changing idea of marriage and motherhood, the novels differs from the preceding generation of female writers in the rebellious strategies employed by the daughters to rescind patriarchal order in order to salvage what is left of themselves and their mothers. Both texts are set in different contexts and locales, but they deal with the reality of the asymmetric gender geometry, most especially in the matrimonial enterprise. In order to articulate the artistic intensions of these new African writers, the discourse appraises how the female protagonists in these novels rescind orthodoxy in order to resuscitate the receding voice of the marginalized mothers. This is achieved through different rebellious stratagem the protagonists employ to rebel against patriarchy in order to construct their own identity.

With the resurgence of new voices in the last decade of the twentieth century and beginning of the new millennium the novel genre in Nigeria (Africa) continues to grow. Most of these novelists are permanently based outside Africa. Hale (2006) describes them as a "permanent African literary diaspora" (p. 18). Most of these novelists employ oral poetics such as proverbs, myths, and folktales to address post-independence concerns. Their experiences are not too distant from those of the first and second generations of Nigerian novelists. Only the political atmosphere differs; the temper remains the same.

Invariably the outstanding attribute of the Nigerian novelist according to Irele (1981) is "his immediate engagement with history" (p. 69). This cardinal thrust of African literature at large has been bi-focal; it is either geared towards assessing colonization or interrogating post-independence malice. This dual artistic drive continues to sustain the literature within its tear-soaked canvas.

Yet the nation state in Africa continues to wobble in crisis. Misrule and corruption seem to be deeply entrenched in the psyche of the rulers, provoking widespread skepticism of an idyllic future. This in turn leaves the ruled mired in the economic sodden of the continent, where they are sustained in a supine state. Politics and history are no doubt the twin items the African novelist employs as literary or artistic intensifiers. Asein (1978) insists that a "writer should play a purposeful role in the human drama of his time" (p. 74). Nnolim (2006) and Kehinde (2005) are not comfortable with the incessant rearward glancing of the Nigerian novelist; hence both critics become advocates of utopianism. However, considering the contours in the topography of Nigerian politics, which makes Beckett and Young (1997, p. 4), contend that since the country has chosen to remain in "permanent transition", her novel will continue to capture the tears of the *low downs*, the Nigerian novelist will continue to look rearward for a long time to come.

While the thrust of this discourse is not a strictly positioned with the intent to attempt a feminist reading of texts, yet it seeks to appraise the texts within the feminist context since the novelists are gender conscious and they explore women's experiences in both their traditional and contemporary societies. This paper argues that *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and *Sky High Flames* (2005) are a continuation of and a challenge to the popular theme in African women's writing, which dramatizes how contemporary African woman can negotiate her way between the burdens of modernization and tradition, foregrounding the changing ideas of marriage and motherhood. However, the novels have an ideological thrust and rebellious temper, which distinguish them from novels of the preceding generation. Both texts are set in different contexts and locales but deal with the reality of the asymmetric gender geometry, most especially in the matrimonial enterprise. These novels create a bifurcation of female characters, what Stratton (1994) terms the "convention of paired women" (p. 97). The texts polarize female characters into either the trope of "suffering good wife" or "cynical modern woman" (Olausen, 2002, p. 61) Thus the concern of the novels is not far from Taiwo (1984) description of women's writings as :

particularly concerned with the role of women in local, national and international affairs[...]The female novelist not only glorifies womanhood in her writing; she also shows concern for the material and spiritual well-being of the society in which women form only a part. (p. 15)

As new writers in a new millennium, these female novelists aspire towards new paradigms for the signification of the contemporary African woman. This art is gradually becoming a recognizable genre in its own right. Although according to Ekpa (2000), "we encounter in such writings a world stratified along sex lines with the male dominating the female in all spheres of life" (p. 33), the writers offer "faithful portrayals, patterns of self analysis and general insights into female psyche, ignored by, or inaccessible to African male writers." (Umeh, 1980, p. 195)

The novels *Purple Hibiscus* and *Sky High Flames* seem a continuation of and a challenge to the popular theme in women's writing, which dramatizes how contemporary African woman can negotiate her way between the burdens of a globalizing world and tradition, foregrounding the changing ideas of marriage and motherhood. Both texts are set in different contexts and locales, but they deal with the reality of the gender geometry, most especially in the matrimonial enterprise.

The Burdens of Daughterhood and the routes of liberation in Sky-High Flames

Unoma Azuah's novel is woman-centered and explores women's experience in both the traditional and the contemporary society. *Sky High Flames* begins with a startling announcement about the rigors of being a first daughter in a Nigerian family:

I was almost driven to hate my parents. My father never approved of anything I did. He felt he knew what was best for me, and my mother picked on me like a bird with a sharp beak. As the first daughter, I've always had to cater to everyone's need, but any minute spent by myself was called daydreaming. (p. 7)

From childhood, Ofunne's destiny has been channeled towards the route of total domesticity. Her parents would do anything to ensure this course of her destiny is not truncated. She is entrapped at a very tender age. As a child she is unaware of her family's wish for her. She wants education so that

she can marry the man of her dreams. However, her parents seem to have a different idea. Whatever Ofunne does in the home is geared towards preparing her for a domestic future. Her desire for education becomes a leeway from the phallogocentric dictates of her world. Through the categorical tone of the first-person narrator Ofunne gives a vivid description of her home, how she is trapped in the middle of this culinary site and how she hopes to be liberated soon, when her entrance examination result is released. An eldest daughter of the home carries numerous burdens. She gives a lucid survey of the homestead, which she views ambivalently, with both attachment and detachment. The battle to get firewood lit in the kitchen, trips to the Oshimili River and providing enough water for domestic purpose in the home, carrying water which presses her spine and cooking meals for everybody in the house. Every assignment she undertakes in the house is a preparation towards becoming a wife.

Iloba, Ofunne's immediate younger brother, seems to be excluded from the world of total domesticity. While he can sometimes escape the absorbing and labour-intensive chores that keep the homestead stable, Ofunne's energy is expended regularly to ensure the family gets going domestically. She hardly has any opportunity for leisure; when she creates leisured moments for herself, she evades being punished by creating a self imposed duty -which exonerates her from the rage of her parents -the incidence of the "worm infested bundle of firewood" (p. 16) readily comes to mind. There is hardly a division of labor among the children. If there is any, it is lopsided or asymmetrical. Nair (1995) suggests that the "division of labor is not meant to exclude the males' responsibility to family; it merely differentiates and differs it" (p. 133). Erickson (1968) argues that "anatomy, history and personality combine to form one's destiny" (p. 26) and for Easthope (1986) "every society assigns new arrivals (i.e. new borns) particular roles, including gender roles which they have to learn" (p. 3). However, the stereotype gender roles are culture induced, as McMillan argued (1982):

The thrust of feminist argument has ... for the most part rested on the belief that since (apart from reproduction) there are no important differences between the sexes, nothing can justify a segregation of their roles. Any differences which may exist are said to be fostered culturally by forcing women to concentrate their activities exclusively in the domestic sphere. (IX)

Socialization practices condition women into accepting their future roles as cooks, beasts of burden, fetchers and hewers of firewood and fetchers of water. It becomes paradoxical to note that older women are the socializing agents of these stereotype gender roles. The limitation of women's energies and attention to subservient roles and functions within the domestic and socio-civic sites demonstrate the inefficient use of human resources, which in turn lives the potentials of women grossly untapped.

Azuah evokes the nervous tension of village life and depicts the dramas of every existence in a cross-section of the society, a society that psychologically signposts the asymmetric gender configuration, people are not told what to do; they know what to do, because the gender geometry becomes the central plank of cultural life. Ofunne at a very tender age is able to resist attempts of the phallogocentric dictates of her society to confine her to circumscribed space when she triumphs over the young boys who are supposed to be Iloba's age mates at the river. This incidence is a dramatization of signs of incipient determination to overcome her marginal status. From the beginning of her story to when she is exiled into marriage, one will find many examples of attempts to socialize her at an early age into her feminine role, which would in turn render her uncreative and docile. Ofunne becomes responsible for the domesticity of her home, if she fails in her duties she becomes accountable for whatever misery emanates from that failure. When Ike gets to school late and his teacher quizzes him on his failure to come to school early; he holds Ofunne responsible. "Ofunne didn't cook early" (p. 13). By the time Ofunne leaves her home for high school, she has been partially domesticated, partially because the culinary site has failed to leaven her life as a woman.

History has imposed the clash of the traditional and the modern as an inevitable theme in African literature. However, for Ofunne, the movement from rurality to urbanity does not exhibit any form of bland bewilderment, rather it creates a minute degree of puzzlement and excitement in her psyche. Unlike Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus*, school for Ofunne is a place of becoming. She is the favorite among the teachers and students. Ofunne gradually learns to deal with her new environment. However, sometimes she is seized by occasional fit of eccentricity which propels her into exciting troubles with fellow students or the head teacher of the school.

Dunton (2006) suggests that the main plot of the novel emerges, "like a thief in the night, around one-third of the way through the narrative, when Oko, a man twice her age, comes to see Ofunne at school" (p. 18). With a sensational announcement of his harmless visit, Oko tells Ofunne's friends that,

he was just here to visit Ofunne and introduce himself to her (p. 67) Ofunne has just one year left in school when her mother becomes indisposed. As the eldest daughter of the home she automatically becomes the item to be sold off to generate fund to restore her mother's health. The singular decision of Ofunne's parents to marry her in order to make her fulfilled as a woman succinctly captures the dangers in a culture which believes in the primacy of the girl child as an item of trade. Although Oko volunteers to take responsibility of Ofunne's education, she refuses to be part of this arrangement. Her determination to overcome her marginal status is demonstrated in her attempts to work at school in order to raise money to sustain her education.

As school gradually winds up for vacation, Ofunne and Awele begin to reminisce about village life, the former is unaware that her fate has been completely decided. Oko, her husband, announces to her that her course has changed, rather than go home and reunite with her family, she heads for Kaduna en route a new life and world. Awele is so grief stricken by the reality of the sudden separation from her friend so that she forgets to wish her well. Ofunne's plight is even more deplorable -because no member of her family is around to give her away to her husband or wish her conjugal bliss. Azuah captures this chaos through graphology. Chapter three is the shortest, indicating that no matter how much time is spent during partings, goodbyes are usually brief.

On arrival at Kaduna, Oko refuses to allow Ofunne settle down -like Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* who is ravaged the very night she arrives her new husband's abode. Oko tries to swoop on Ofunne, but she resists him and bolts. A mock marriage is arranged the following day. The church was empty and there was no boisterous bunting -only a silence-filled church. Oko resents his denial of his conjugal right hence he quickly arranges for the marriage. Having satisfied the cultural demands of marriage, Ofunne becomes an 'occupied territory.' Azuah seems to be creating violence from the scene of the couple's first attempt at sex. It is her first time, and it is imperative that she should bleed. Bleeding becomes the proof of virginity. The Christian religion becomes an instrument of Ofunne's subjugation and exploitation. Ofunne is willingly given to Oko because her parents believe the Okolos are good Catholics. She finally accedes to sex because Oko arranges for a mock marriage in the church. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene also uses religion as an instrument to instill fear on his family so that when he batters them at will, the moral justification of their battery is never questioned.

Ofunne soon discovers Oko's promiscuity which is abhorrent to her sense of decency. This revelation irrigates the silence in the home. Unlike in *Purple Hibiscus* where silence is a patriarchal tool for female subjugation, silence in *Sky High Flames* is a tool to check the overbearing nature of patriarchy. Whenever Oko defaults, Ofunne regresses into a glaring silence that frustrates Oko. This is one of the strategies Ofunne employs to check her philandering husband. The other strategy is the use of the culinary power which Kambili's mother uses to a dangerous end. Ofunne only uses this strategy to curb her husband's excesses from time to time. Once he is found wanting Ofunne refuses to cook for him. The use of this marginal domestic power, though interim, helps Ofunne to check her husband's lust for women and exert some degree of control over him.

Matrimony for Ofunne gradually becomes an arduous enterprise because her husband refuses to make the business relishing. She reminisces on the steady gaze Oko gave Uka's large breasts, on one of his visits to her school. The gaze is not just an amorous advance, but an amplification of the extent of his promiscuity. At this point, the novel floats around existential themes of pain and exile. Although Ofunne has been able to conquer the agony of the sudden separation from her biological family, Oko's stupidities would not allow her grapple with the realities of marriage; she automatically becomes an exile, a phenomenon which negates and abuses the geography and culture of home in her head. One way out of this exile is to write her mother and her friend Awele.

Literary representations of women in an urban environment often function symbolically as loss of innocence where the pure daughter and mother of the village is reduced to a prostitute. Ofunne's case belies or negates the above claim. By the time she returns to the village, she is still a 'virgin' although pregnant. The singular fact of disallowing the medical doctor induce her to aid her delivery or the refusal to allow the medical doctor take total control of midwifing her, shows how naïve she still is. She is married a 'child' and she returns home after over eighteen months still a child. The activities and actions of the older women in the text are detrimental to Ofunne's aspirations, but within the context of the reality that the novel stresses -the powerlessness of women- they turn to be the only sensible alternatives.

Abashed by the devastating blow of the syphilis he thought Kpako had treated a couple of months before; Oko abandons his wife and refuses to put her in the know of her state of health. This further af-

firms strongly Ofunne's opinion of him - "unfaithful and reckless, a child" (115). As her crisis lingers and deepens, Ofunne displaces her Catholic God especially as this God remains the agent that gallops her misery and subjugation. She presents herself empty before Onishe the water goddess. This scene eloquently dramatizes Ofunne's sense of religious obligation. One may confuse her intention here. It is not the locale that dictates her spiritual loyalty. She abandons the white God which is an extension of the male dominance. Her parents had given her to Oko not only because they wanted money to meet their needs, but because they felt the Okolos are a good Catholic family. (Ogunyemi 1995) discussing Uhamiri in Flora Nwapa's novels notes that, "God the Christian father suffers a displacement. His gender betrays him as a warlord whom the women gradually replace with the more amenable mater, Uhamiri" (p. 13). This assertion is relevant to Ofunne's life. She abandons the Catholic God and takes refuge in the shrine of the feminine water goddess, Onishe, an occasion of epiphany for her in her state of trance.

Phallogentric Order and the Struggle for Feminine Voicing in *Purple Hibiscus*

From *Sky High Flames* to *Purple Hibiscus* is a move from the demotic to aristocratic. *Purple Hibiscus*, unlike *Sky High Flames*, begins with crisis and silence running through the book, glowing and hauntingly gripping. The book begins in *media res* realized through a flashback. The novel traces the psychological development of the protagonist, Kambili, and her brother, Jaja. Their fussy mercantile father builds a world stuffed with materialistic wholeness, a world that lacks ventilation and guarantees a steady relationship with the outside only when the inside becomes too suffocating. The narrative is woven around Palm Sunday, yet the development of the protagonist and her brother has a quadrilateral dimension -their home in Enugu, school, church and Nsukka.

Eugene, Kambili's father, is an ideologue, a religious maverick and his bigotry is anchored on theological Catholicism. He works hard to ensure his family lacks nothing. His houses are capacious yet stifling, and the bedrooms are very roomy yet stuffy. Kambili's description of the contrast between their commodious apartment and its airlessness is telling, "Although our spacious dining room gave way to even wider living room, I felt suffocated" (p. 9). Eugene is the living symbol of masculinity and, therefore, patriarchy in the novel. He is the epitome of this culture -he is domineering, benevolent, the provider for his nuclear and extended family; but callous, unthinking, unimaginative, uncreative though hardworking in a stilted way. Adichie treats masculinity as the source of oppression, not only for Kambili's mother but for the children. Outside the home most people think Eugene's home is the ideal, but the blank faces and bland smiles of the children and their mother reveal their family life as an empty shell. The organic life of the Eugenes thrives on internal conflict and divided feeling -the novel produces and reproduces the family void.

Silence in Eugene's home is so magnified to the extent that it could be touched. The function of Kambili's tongue is so constricted so that her struggle to express herself usually terminates with a stutter, making her classmates observe her with familiarity laced with contempt. Because of her inability to make her tongue function in school she is labeled a "backyard snob" (p. 53). To make matters worse, when the closing bell rings, she dashes off to her father's waiting car to be chauffeur-driven home without exchanging pleasantries with her classmates. Her classmates see this as aristocratic arrogance. They are unaware that her life is dictated and regulated by a schedule scrolled in her heart.

From time to time Eugene's sense of production enunciates his stance as a capitalist as he brings a new product home from his factories to be assessed by his reticent family. Ofunne's father is strict but not as mechanical as Eugene. Although Ofunne's parents discourage leisure, Ofunne sometimes tells lies to escape her parents' wrath and often gets away with it. Kambili's mother hardly talks and when she does, it is in monosyllables. Eugene runs his home with a zero tolerance in its grossest and most intransigent sense, and this in turn reduces his family to a resonating silence in almost all their endeavors, outside and inside the home. Silencing becomes a strategy of keeping women on a leash even within the domestic site. As Uwakwe (1995) observes,

Silencing comprises all imposed restrictions on women's social being, thinking and expressions that are religiously or culturally sanctioned. As a patriarchal weapon of control, it is used by the dominant male structure on the subordinate or "muted" female structure. (p. 75)

Ofunne has been able to prove that women can use silence as strategy to keep men in check and garner attention in the home. However, for Eugene's family, silencing is not only a mechanism or

weapon of patriarchal control but of domestic servitude. Kambili, Jaja and their mother, devise ways of survival within the utilitarian calculus.

Purple Hibiscus has a feminist thrust but the brand of feminism is subtle regardless of Kambili's mother murdering her father. One may hardly deduce from the text the conflictual relationship between man and woman. Adichie artistically tries not to create a situation where women are not only completely marginalized but the masculine voice triumphs over the female. Sometimes she uses ironies, sarcasms and exaggerations to contradict situations, but her intention is discernible. For example, Papa Nnukwu gets frustrated by his son's dereliction of his responsibility and blames the missionaries for the hiatus created between him and his son. Ifeoma tries to exonerate the missionaries for Eugene's lackadaisical attitude towards Papa Nnukwu by affirming that both of them have the same elementary upbringing, "it was not the missionary. Did I not go to the missionary school too?" (p. 83) Papa Nnukwu laments with a passionate fidelity, "but you are a woman. You don't count." The veracity of this statement is incontestable yet the monumentality of the statement is attenuated when the old man remarks that, "I joke with you, Nwam. Where would I be today if my Chi had not given me a daughter?" (p. 83) When Kambili narrates the issue of spouse beating, she does so with a sense of ordinariness and opacity that one can hardly describe Eugene's home as a domestic war zone although he batters his wife and children occasionally. The helplessness of the traditional African woman is only articulated very vibrantly when Kambili's mother in remarks "where would I go if I leave Eugene's house?" (p. 250). The conviction of her helplessness makes her silence in the home even more galloping. It is because of this feminine docility and economic inertia that Ofunne tries to rid herself of when she opts for hawking fish rather than confine herself to the status of the permanent wife who waits upon the husband for everything – an office that is slavish, labor intensive and attracts no financial remuneration; the office of the unpaid domestic worker. (Mama 1977) argues that

the confinement of women to the economically dependent role of housewife is a condition that has made it difficult for many women to leave otherwise unbearably violent situations. In other words, the domestication of women is a precondition for the crime we define as domestic violence. (p. 35)

Eugene only grants his children audience with their grandfather for fifteen minutes. Anything more is abominating and sinful and must be confessed before the priest for remission of sin. From their father's prayers and remarks, they conclude that their grandfather must be pagan. Eugene will not allow his father into his premises because of the inverse correlation that characterizes their religious beliefs. It is Ifeoma who gives Kambili and Jaja the exclusive benefit of knowing their grandfather beyond the atheistic portraiture their father has cartographed in their mind. Kambili observes her grandfather, Nnukwu with filial attachment from a distance because she has been zipped up by her father's doctrinaire stance towards Papa Nnukwu which is informed by Kambili's father's inebriated religion.

For Kambili, Nsukka does not only represent a town where her aunt lives but a symbol of liberty as the concluding chapter evidences. Her teenage development becomes complete in this town, because for the very first time, her mouth performs almost all the functions associated with it. She smiles, talks, cries, laughs, jokes and sings. For the first time Kambili lives a life not dictated by schedules. In Ifeoma's house everybody has is free to say anything, provided elders are not insulted. This enthusiasm with which discourses are introduced and sustained is not only mind boggling, but also a source of consternation for Kambili. Through Father Amadi, she discovers a new brand of Catholicism, which is not mechanical and dictatorial but lithe; it directly contrasts the one Father Benedict and her father practice –one which makes room for dissent. Father Amadi easily discerns that Kambili is gnostic, although she is conditioned by the ritualized sense of religion her father had created for her. He devises a means with which to wring her from her silent space. Since her sense of Catholicism is ritualistic, and Jesus or God becomes the common denominator, it becomes apparently glaring that she will be willing to do anything provided it is associated with God or Jesus. Through this device Father Amadi breaks through her frozen sense of comportment.

By the time Kambili and Jaja return home, they have been untaught by their aunt, Ifeoma and they bring items along with them –Kambili the uncompleted painting of her grandfather given to her by Amaka and Jaja seeds of purple hibiscus. With these items they hope to sustain a steady link with their aunt's airy world. With these items they hope never to plunge into the borders of frustration, disillusionment, alienation, and the existential solitude of the world they know too well. The items will help them cram the vacuum created in their lives.

Kambili's painting is discovered by Eugene. Like the extremist that her father is, he seizes the painting from his children who claim ownership of the item simultaneously. Stunned by this development, Eu-

gene destroys the painting, Kambili refuses to hold back. Like Ofunne who revolts against tradition and beats up her mother-in-law Kambili, begins to piece the pieces of the painting together. She is not willing to observe her father truncate the stable transition of her development – which the painting will help her realize even within the circumscribed radius of her father's walls. The painting symbolizes freedom to her and at the same time the remains of her grandfather which she never had while he was alive. Like Lousa in Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* who collapses before her father in a condemnation of the unproductive upbringing that her father gave her, Kambili solemnly strings the pieces together. Stunned at the confutation of his conservative religious standard –an occasion where he is completely subdued by the first shocking witness of the result of his rigid religious matrix, Kambili's handling of the pieces of the painting symbolizes the collapse of her father's system and, by extension, patriarchy.

Both novels of Azuah and Adichie perambulate around the perimeters of entrapment and freedom. Just as Ofunne parallels herself to the onion bulbs in Oko's cupboard, Kambili watches with admiration a snail crawling out of a basket on several occasions and returning to the same basket on each attempt to escape – a dramatization of the struggle for liberation. Both novelists anticipate the future by creating in the lives of their protagonists a sense of foreboding and freedom through dreams. For Ofunne, she dreams of her future entrapment in page twenty where she sees two men, one vomiting into her mouth and the other laughing and her liberation in the dream where she develops wings and flies. For Kambili she dreams of her father's death which initially was "Ade Coker's charred remains ..., I was the daughter and the charred remains become papa" (p. 207).

Kambili's mother, like Ofunne's mother is an embodiment of the traditional African woman. She is unsophisticated and content with the economic security her husband guarantees, and decides to liberate her children and herself from her husband's sinking philosophy. She is about the most interesting character in the novel. She steps out of her enervating state, fractures the patriarchal social structure and demystifies the idealized traditional images of the African woman. She puts behind the psychological rift between her body and mind and liberates herself from the marginal status she assumes at the beginning of the novel as she begins to doctor her husband's meals. It is this aspect of the novel that gives it the radical feminist outlook.

Azuah's portraiture of women is close to Flora Nwapa's. Ofunne, like Nwapa's heroines, remains true to the ideals of the duties of a good wife despite the irresponsible behavior of her husband. Like Nwapa's heroines, Ofunne refuses to be a parasite and begins to hawk fish to meet the requirements of her immediate needs. Though Ofunne does everything to keep her marriage, she decides to break away when she is stretched beyond her limits. She never reconciles with her husband, rather she hopes to begin a new life. Her breaking loose from the patriarchal leash is not total emancipation, as it were, but a definite statement of self-reawakening, an awakening to the realities of the prison walls of women and the urgent need to crack the walls where obnoxious cultural and religious practices are sustained to dehumanize women. Moreover, for Kambili's mother, breaking free fails to produce the desired liberation, but the poisoning of Eugene is an unequivocal statement of the rejection of orthodoxy. What she obtains from the death of Eugene is a nervous breakdown. She becomes further entrapped. Both novels are marked by a powerful refusal to yield, and they represent women as individuals with conscience, able to question the system that marginalizes and disempowers women.

Conclusion

Since the sixties when Nwapa debuted with *Efuru*, and Buchi Emecheta pondering about when God "will create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" the gender conflict still lingers –making the marriage institution seem a lame duck. The struggle for parity amongst the sexes is going to prove more difficult than that of decolonization, because the site of the battle is the family, and the family is made up of people with blood ties –husband and wife, brother and sister, father and mother. Invariably it is a duel that pits the family against itself. However, Ogundipe (2002) contends that, it "is not in the nature of power to give itself away to the powerless. The powerless must FIGHT to acquire power" (p. 43). The above assertion becomes relevant to the struggle of women in both novels. Kambili, Ofunne, Kambili's mother and Ifeoma, emanate as figures of integrity that refuse to relinquish their selfhood or conform to phallogocentric stereotypes of what women should be. They are peripheral figures of a peripheral landscape, embodiments of the agony of the marginality of femininity. But one thing is sure, these women are resilient and ready to mortgage their lives at the margins, and that margin is a new site of power. Kambili and Ofunne begin as emo-

tionally and psychologically frustrated women, especially because of the psychologised nature of the domestic site. However, in the end they become socially conscious. Azuah and Adichie refuse to re-verberate the prominent female stereotype of the prostitute, the whore, or the witch. Rather they have devised new templates for the signification and appreciation of contemporary African woman.

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