

THE CHALLENGE OF FEMINISM IN KENYA: TOWARDS AN AFROCENTRIC
WORLDVIEW.

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THE CANDIDATE CONFIRMS THAT THE WORK SUBMITTED IS HIS OWN
AND THAT APPROPRIATE CREDIT HAS BEEN GIVEN WHERE REFERENCE
HAS BEEN MADE TO THE WORK OF OTHERS.

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my Mum for protecting Dad, to Dad who never lay a finger on mum and to my twin daughters, Ivy Njeri and Daisy Wanjiru to whom the future belongs.

Abstract

This study deals with African women's literature, and specifically creative writing by Kenyan women, in the context of feminism and Afrocentricity. In the words of Obioma Nnaemeka (1995) critics of African women's literature have tended to rename, misname or silence women's voices in an attempt to make them fit into a feminist/Afrocentricity either or mould. This thesis argues that when attention is paid to African women themselves, and the cultures from which and within which they write, it is clear that they embrace both feminism and Afrocentricity. By feminism I refer to African women's vision and activism for sexual equality and women's liberation while by Afrocentricity I am thinking of their commitment and pride in their African cultures and traditions.

The first chapter argues that Kenyan women, in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times, have been active and voiced in their stance against oppression of any kind. In the second chapter, I explore the relationship between feminism and Afrocentricity in a wider sense. I pay attention to the ways in which the two concepts have manifested themselves in Africa and her Diaspora as well as in the western world. . In chapter three, domestic violence, rape, poverty, and a gender insensitive legal and judiciary system are the dominant issues of concern to short stories writers from Kenya. In the fourth chapter, Ogot is seen as a liberal Afrocentric feminist in her call for African women to create room for themselves within African systems of thought and practice. Chapter five, on Oludhe Macgoye, argues that to be Afrocentric is cultural rather than racial. In Chapter six Rebeke Njau and Margaret Ogola are seen as Afrocentric while Tsitsi Dangarembga and Alice Walker are seen as Eurocentric. The thesis concludes that feminism in practice is not necessarily an occidental phenomenon. An African woman writer can be both feminist and Afrocentric.

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Introduction

In her article titled “Feminist criticism and the African novel” Katherine Frank (1984) asks : “ ... how can we rescue and re-evaluate people like Nwapa and Aidoo and Ogot from the parentheses and footnotes of male oriented and male authored African literary history”(44)? She then goes on to say that “[a] systematic attempt to answer such questions...would result in an invaluable contribution to both African and women’s studies, and would go a long way towards establishing a peculiarly African kind of feminist criticism”(44). Frank’s diagnosis of the problem in African women’s literature is accurate but one sided. It seems to suggest that African women’s literature has only suffered at the hands of men. In 1984 when Frank was writing her article, Florence Stratton’s (1994) *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* had not yet been published and Frank herself had not yet published her 1987 article, “Women without men: The feminist novel in Africa”, in which she argues that the African woman’s novel is more feminist than its western counterpart because African women’s fiction calls for a separatist world, a world in which there are no men. Katherine Frank may therefore not have been able to “see” as Kolawole (1997) does that there is a need for “African women... to force their voices into existing male and western feminist discourse...(6)”. Frank had probably not heard of the many African women writers such as Ogot (1998), Njau (1998), Macgoye (1998), Emecheta in Nnaemeka (1997a), and many others who insist that they should not be inscribed as feminists. However, although she does not acknowledge that African women writers are caught between western feminist critical interpretations and a male dominated African literary criticism, the problem she raises is nevertheless fundamental to the study of African women’s literature. In this thesis, my interpretation of African women’s fiction is driven by the conviction that African women’s voices need to be factored into the reading of gender issues in African literature. I feel that the African woman’s voice has been either

silenced, ignored, or mis-represented precisely because the dominant discourses on the subject of gender in Africa have either been by African male or by western female writers. African male writers, having previously encountered western feminist theories, have generally assumed that African women writers would emulate their western counterparts. The male critics therefore tend to castigate women writers for aping western values that are inconsistent with African realities. On the other hand, western women have ascribed to African women's literature the kind of rhetoric they (western women) would like to hear from African women rather than what the African women actually say. It is in this context that I understand Nnaemeka's (1995) argument that African male literary critics as well as western feminist theorists tend to "rename, misname, and silence"(80) African women's literary voices. In as much as one might argue that this study is equally part of the existing African male discourses on African women, my thesis is an attempt to listen to African women. I therefore interviewed all the major Kenyan women writers whose works I have examined in this thesis, not to make them tell me the meaning of their own works but to seek their ideas on the subject of feminism/gender issues or women's liberation in Africa. I discovered that contrary to views articulated by men, especially in newspapers, suggesting that African women were imbibing western values, that they were in opposition to marriage, motherhood, homemaking and other traditionally constructed feminine roles, the women's major concerns were much broader, with equal opportunities to education, job markets, national resources, health and others being central to their agenda. Indeed, many of them seemed to think that some aspects of African socialisation are as hostile to men as they are to women. After the interviews I felt even more convinced that the antagonism sometimes evident between the sexes in Africa in regard to equality has more to do with misreading, or failure to read at all, African women's voices, than it has to do with what the women actually say. At the same time it became clear that the issues the

women are concerned with are the very same ones that feminists across the world have been and are still dealing with. In this thesis I have endeavoured to demonstrate that feminism defined as the struggle against gender inequity, need not be antagonistic or in opposition to Afrocentricity. By Afrocentricity I mean the ability to construct reality from an African perspective, which invariably includes pride in African cultures¹.

I begin from the premise that it is not possible to arrive at the concept “African” without first dealing with the many and diverse ethnic communities and other sectarian groupings in the continent. In order to arrive at the “Afrocentric” it is important to pay attention to the various parts that make up Africa. For this reason, chapter one of this study looks at Kenyan consciousness seen in the context of specific communities. I argue that we should think in terms of what I call concentric circles of consciousness, where we begin with individuals as located in communities, that are in turn located in ethnic groups and which combine to make up countries. I argue that it is through concentric circles of consciousness that we can begin conceptualising identity tags such as Kikuyu, Kenyan, East African, African and so on. Chapter one is an attempt to demonstrate the many ways in which Kenyans construct the self as well as an attempt to use specific examples from specific communities to show how different communities in Africa might begin to formulate their identities. The argument here is that that identity is both cultural and geo-political. I believe that the same mechanics operative in Kenya are largely applicable to many other African countries.

In chapter two I deal with why African women deny being feminist even when the issues they are dealing with are explicitly feminist. While interviewing women in

¹ Note that throughout this thesis culture is taken as the all-encompassing term while tradition is used to refer to the specific manifestations of culture. The two terms are therefore not taken as distinctively different. I take the view that if feminism challenges and calls for abandoning of specific African traditions, that should not necessarily be taken as challenging African culture(s).

Kenya, I found out that whether or not African women will embrace the term feminist is very much dependent on the definition(s) attached to the term. Kabira (1998), for example, argued that feminism in Africa has tended to be mainly associated with the radical aspects of the American women's movement. Her argument is that if it were seen as humanism that includes women, feminism would be acceptable to African women. Chapter two argues, for purposes of this thesis, that feminism should be seen in broad terms and specifically at two levels: 1) a consciousness that women universally are oppressed and discriminated against on the basis of their sex, and the consequent deliberate attempt to bring about equality; and 2) women's struggle against injustice even when they are not conscious that they are fighting a universal practice. I find Obioma Nnaemeka's (1998) argument that for African women, "to think feminist is to act feminist"(5) appropriate for my definition here. Chapter two of this thesis also argues that before inscribing African women as feminist, we need to examine the concept in the context of its historicity and location in western culture as well as its manifestation in traditional Africa prior to colonialism. If we do that, we will be able to see in what ways African women writers are building on or following in the footsteps of their mothers and grandmothers. We can then begin to talk about Afrocentric feminism. By Afrocentric we refer to the ability to celebrate being African without necessarily being blind to the negative aspects of cultures and traditions of Africa. Being African should of course be seen in a very wide sense that is not limited to geography, colour or even specific cultures. This does not mean that geography, colour and culture are not important to that definition, it only means that the absence of any one of these aspects does not necessarily exclude one from being African. Being African has to be seen in the context of globalisation in the sense that the African self is defined first and foremost from the perspective of the individual as located in specific communities that

are culturally connected to geographical Africa, physically or metaphysically, and who then identifies himself/herself as African in relation to the rest of the world.

The authors studied in this thesis are mainly Kikuyu or Luo. While there are more than forty communities in Kenya, it is justifiable that Kikuyu and Luo should dominate this thesis because they are the majority in the country, with the Kikuyu constituting nearly a quarter of the total Kenyan population. The two communities also happen to have produced Kenya's major writers, male or female. Chapter three, however, deals with short stories that are more inclusive, with many more communities included in the list of authors. The short stories were easy to pick because they are contained in two anthologies, *They Have Destroyed the Temple* (1992) and *Our Secret Lives: An Anthology of Poems and Short Stories by Kenyan Women Writers*, (1990) both of which came out of seminars on gender issues in Kenya. It is interesting that most of the stories in these anthologies are first person narratives suggesting an intimacy between the authors and their creations. I do not of course treat the stories, nor the longer narratives of the other women writers, as autobiographical or even anthropological, but I do think that all creative writing and all art is somehow connected to the real experience of its author. I think it is correct to regard the issues that emerge out of the short stories as constitutive of what Kenyan women would consider to be the burning issues of the day. Indeed most of the stories in the two anthologies read less like creative writing than documentation of personal suffering at the hands of a patriarchal society and of men in particular. Most of the narratives have simple linear plots and are devoid of artistic/stylistic complexity. It is possible to argue that the women have chosen this mode of expression because it enables them to remain intimate with their own experiences.

These narratives, however, provide an excellent database of issues and concerns that Kenyan women feel should be addressed if their status in society is to be improved. An analysis of the stories reveals that while western feminist critics of African literature seem to think African women's literature is or should be concerned with such issues as female circumcision/FGM, wife inheritance, polygamy, bride price/dowry and other practices, the short stories' writers do not rank these issues very highly on their agenda. It is, for example, interesting that female circumcision, which is the subject of two full length books by Alice Walker (1992, 1993), has not been central to the work of a single author in Kenya. It might of course be argued that African women are failing or refusing to confront some of the issues they find controversial and or problematic, but female circumcision is actually given fleeting attention in Ogot's as well as Macgoye's fiction. Margaret Ogola (1998) argues that the interpretation of the practice as a monstrosity is a western agenda to which some of the African women have bought into. Miriam Were, whose novel, *Your heart is my altar*, is not examined in detail in this thesis also mentions the practice without condemning it. Were in fact seems to celebrate the ritual's place in teaching and enabling women to deal with their sexuality. My argument here is that African women are less concerned with so called evil African cultural practices than they are with more universal issues such as rape and domestic violence; equal access to education; equality before the law and the way in which modern legal practice disadvantages women caught in traditional institutions such as in marriages (where for example the law is not clear on polygamous marriages, when one woman is married customarily and the other according to civil codes); equal access to the national wealth; and equal access to job opportunities. This does not of course suggest that women think that African cultures are not sexist, indeed the above list of what African women seem to prioritise is very much connected to some African cultural practices, but in some

cases the women seem to think that it is not that the cultures are sexist but that men give the cultures sexist interpretations. In chapter one I demonstrate ways in which the Kikuyu myth of origin has been given sexist interpretations, hence silencing the mythological representation of Kikuyu women's agency in the emergence of the Kikuyu as a community.

The writers I focus on do not of course approach all these issues from the same perspective, neither do they give equal weight to the same issues. Grace Ogot, in chapter four, emerges as a liberal Afrocentric feminist. She sees the need to create room for women within the traditional space. In other words it is possible for African women to be active and voiced within existing social structures, especially if men would be less self-centred and stop manipulating cultural practices to suit themselves. Ogot's liberal feminism would very much fit into what Nnaemeka (1995) calls nego-feminism by which she means a feminism that negotiates rather than aggressively fights to create space for women in existing social, cultural and economic systems. Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, in chapter five, not only chooses different topics but also approaches women's issues from a completely different perspective. First she chooses to historicise women's activism by demonstrating that there have been active, independent, gender conscious women in society that have largely been ignored. Her characters are therefore contextualised within Kenyan history to demonstrate that women contributed to such important historical narratives as the struggle for independence, but she laments that unfortunately the Kenyan women's efforts have not been rewarded in the post-colonial era by their own black, male-dominated governments. Macgoye's search for women and their contribution in Kenya's history is similar to what Elaine Showalter called gyno-criticism, meaning that rather than mourn women's effacement, you dig into history to recover those women whom history has ignored even though they have made

important contributions to society through their writings or actions. Macgoye encourages women to not only negotiate their own spaces within traditions but to also take time to reconstruct their communities' view and interpretation of such concepts as home and create space for themselves, with or without the approval of men. Marriage is attacked as oppressive to women, but Macgoye stops short of advocating single life as an alternative for women. This chapter on Macgoye is also important in demonstrating that Afrocentricity has more to do with cultural perspectives than the race or colour of the writers concerned. I argue that though Macgoye is white, her perspective is Luo and hence Afrocentric.

Chapter six demonstrates the complexity of the concept 'Afrocentric' and the diversity of African feminist perspectives. The argument in this chapter is that being African, even black African², does not necessarily translate into being Afrocentric. The chapter also argues that to be Afrocentric does not mean shying away from criticising what one might consider archaic and or oppressive African cultural systems and traditions. Rebeka Njau, for example, is a very interesting case because of her ability to combine what might be considered radical/lesbian feminism with a strong advocacy for Afrocentricity, yet many critics would agree that lesbianism is not considered central to Afrocentricity. Njau's novel, *Ripples in the Pool* (1975), is the only novel I know in Kenya that not only has explicit lesbian scenes but also treats lesbianism sympathetically. Selina, Njau's heroine in the novel, is used to critique the oppressive nature of heterosexuality to women and to recommend lesbianism as potentially liberating. Selina's choice of a partner is a passive participant called Gaciru, who is her husband's sister and heterosexual, but who is nevertheless not only sympathetic to Selina's suffering, but does not frown upon Selina's lesbian inclinations. Njau's

Afrocentricity is remarkable in the way she defends African spirituality in her delineation of the centrality of the pool as well as in the way her text has very little western influence. Selina's only connection with Europeans is when she uses white men for her own benefit. She cannot be accused of aping western systems of thought or civilisation.

Njau is in many ways very different from Margaret Ogola, also discussed in chapter six, who refuses to be critical of African culture, western civilisation/colonialism and Christianity, or even patriarchy in a general/universal sense. Ogola rather chooses to be optimistic that evil in society can be challenged through resistance aided by both Christianity and tradition, and that men/patriarchy need not be the nemesis of women's freedom. She therefore constructs women's struggle to create space for themselves as a river flowing from the past to the present and likely to continue many generations into the future. Ogola and Njau are analysed against the background of Alice Walker and Tsitsi Dangarembga.

Walker and Dangarembga are critical of both Christianity and African traditions and suggest that because patriarchy is central to both Christianity and African traditions, it is difficult to see how women could find freedom in these two institutions. I argue that although Walker and Dangarembga are both black, from the Diaspora and the continent respectively, they are both Eurocentric in their texts, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Nervous Conditions*. In a way then, this last chapter captures the main thrust of this thesis: that African women's liberty very possibly lies in Afrocentric feminism because only in combining both feminism and Afrocentricity can African women effectively

² The words black and white are used throughout this thesis in full awareness that these are not absolute terms and that there some whom I refer to as black who would prefer to be known as coloured. I suggest that the terms be understood as discursive rather than absolute or self-contained referents.

challenge the evils of racism, as manifest in both colonialism and Christianity, as well as the evils of patriarchy as mainly manifest in African traditions and culture.

Chapter One

Women and Kenyan Consciousness

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has”

(Margaret Mead quoted by Eisenberg, Bonnie and Mary Ruthsdotte 1998)

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section I introduce the reader to Kenya in general. I pay particular attention to the place of women in the construction and preservation of the institutions that I highlight. The second section is a mapping of women's activism. The third examines what it means to be Kenyan in general and specifically to be a Kenyan woman. All the three sections are aimed at laying a general foundation for the analysis of specific fiction by Kenyan women. There are two major arguments in this chapter. The first is aimed at justifying my use of individual women authors within specific ethnic environments to explore the presence of a Kenyan and Afrocentric feminist worldview. The second posits that to be Kenyan takes more than birth or naturalisation. To be Kenyan is a psychological construct. It involves the play of two important elements: geopolitics and nationalist consciousness. My conceptual framework here is that the construction of Kenyan consciousness, like that of any other African country, is both individualistic and collective. This statement is made in full awareness that there are arguments that posit the African/ Euro-American opposition as being primarily characterised by a collective/ individualistic dichotomy. I find Helen Cixous' views expressed in her preface to *The Helen Cixous Reader* (1994) useful here. She says she never asks herself “who am I” but rather “who are I” (xvii). I read in this statement the view that the individual is collectively constructed. The experience of her community is part and parcel of who she is as an individual. The community and the individual are involved in a dialectical relationship. The community shapes the individual as much as the individual shapes the community. It is within this context that

the final part of this chapter interprets Kenyan women's collective organising as well as individual acts aimed at women's social and/or economic liberation as indicative of the need for, and presence of, feminism in Kenya.

Critics who are relatively culturally literate in African women writers' various cultures have clearly not done much in terms of analysis of African women's literature. I am thinking especially of African literary critics' need to undertake such detailed studies of African women writers as Florence Stratton's *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) has done. It is only recently that works by such writers as Kelawole (1997), Nnaemeka (1997a, 1997b), Chukukere (1995), and a few others have begun to pay particular attention, from an African perspective, to women's literature and its response to issues specially related to gender. This study will be a contribution towards that end. My study will obviously be limited by my not being a woman. My literacy in "women's culture" is handicapped by my biology. I plead that: 1) my study is a response to women's demand for attention by critics of African literature, be they men or women; 2) the fact that the women of Africa have invited men to make positive contributions to the debate as articulated by Nnaemeka (1998, 8) who says that "African feminism resists the exclusion of men from women's issues; on the contrary, it invites men as partners in problem solving and social change"; 3) that women's literature is an attempt to construct knowledge and search for the truth and that these are the property of no gender; 4) and finally, that I am writing in full knowledge that I am weaving something that someone else can unweave and this person may be a woman. If that happens, this study will have achieved one of its purposes: to contribute to, and provoke further debate about, feminism in Africa and Kenya in particular. I focus on Kenya because it is the nation that I know best and also because very little has been written on

the country compared to other regions such as West Africa (Nigeria in particular), and South Africa.

The region now called Kenya has a land area of 571,416 square kilometres and a water area of 11,230, totalling to 582,646. In terms of geographical positioning Berg-Schlosser (1984,18) explains that the country "... is situated at about the middle of the eastern coast of the African continent where it is approximately cut in half by the equator". In the west of the country Lake Victoria and Uganda mark her borders. The Indian Ocean provides Kenya with a coastal strip in the east that is loved by tourists. To the south is Tanzania, the largest country of the region now referred to as the East African Community. The East African community, consisting of Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania first came into formal existence in 1967, collapsed in 1977 and was then re-established in 1999 when the heads of state signed the treaty for the establishment of the East African Community in Arusha on 30th November 1999. Sudan and Ethiopia border Kenya in the north while Somalia is in the north-east.

Kenya is a mountainous country with its largest mountain, Mt Kenya, having snow on its top. In most parts of central and western Kenya the altitude varies between 1500 and 2400 metres on average. The climate within these regions is temperate. *The National Development of Kenya 1997-2001* (Republic of Kenya, 1997) says that the rainfall distribution varies from area to area with about eighty percent of the country receiving very little rainfall which is unevenly distributed, making farming a difficult exercise. The eighty-percent of the land is usually referred to as the Arid and Semi Arid Lands (ASAL). The ASAL is said to hold twenty-five percent of Kenya's population and fifty percent of the country's livestock. Many ethnic groups living in these areas are

nomadic pastoralists. Such groups of people find it hard to allow their children, and especially girls, to go to school as they are always on the move.

According to the 1989 population census, an exercise almost irredeemably compromised and which the president of the republic declared a sham, Kenya's population was then 21,443,636. The males comprised 10,628,368 of the population, while the females were 10,815,268. The 1999 census, as reported in East African Standard, indicates the population having grown by 34% to 28,700,000. "The 1999 population figures indicate that 14.5 million or 50.5 per cent are females while 14.2 million or 49.5 per cent are males" (Oyuke and Sino 2001). Both census statistics indicate women comprise marginally more of the population than men which, minimal as it may be, should be taken into consideration in as far as resource allocation is concerned. Kenya is multi-ethnic, with as many as forty-two different African ethnic groups each with its own language. The Kikuyu, Luo and the Luhya are the largest tribes comprising of 20.78, 12.38, and 14.38 percent of the total population respectively. The cultural place and treatment of women in each of the forty-two ethnic groups differs. The Luo, for example, do not practice female or male circumcision while the Kikuyu practice male circumcision and to a lesser extent still practice female circumcision. Female circumcision has largely been eradicated due to the spread of Christianity. Anyone interested in the conflict that was caused by Christianity's opposition to the practice among the Kikuyu will find a thoughtful presentation in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between*. In other communities, such as the Kalenjin and the Meru, female circumcision is still prevalent. I deal with this issue in detail in chapter six of this thesis. In a survey carried out by Boer-Schlosser (1984) the Maasai and the Kalenjin emerged as "... those interpreting a woman's social and political role in the most restrictive sense" (234) as compared to other ethnic groups. More examples

of differences are available and can be arrived at by reading Kenyatta (1938), Ochola-Ayayo (1976), Strobel (1979), and Oboler (1985). The plurality of cultures in Kenya informs my strong conviction that it is not very useful to talk of nationalist consciousness without first and foremost locating ethnic nationalism and then establishing links to the construct “Kenya”.

In terms of economic activities, agriculture, mainly dominated by women, is the backbone of the Kenyan economy. The 1996 *Statistical Abstract* (Republic of Kenya 1996) records only 3,188,038 Kenyans living in the urban areas. The same document also indicates that women are outnumbered in the urban areas but are the majority in the rural areas. Since agricultural activity is mainly a rural phenomenon, it almost invariably follows that women are the majority agricultural workers.

According to the *Report of the Presidential Committee on Employment* (1991), “... women play a dominant role in agriculture, traditionally in food production and increasingly in cash crop production.” The document makes eleven recommendations in order to “... *boost women’s performance, increasing their productivity and efficiency as well as their employment opportunities*” (229) (emphasis in text). Two of the recommendations in this document relate to agriculture. One is a call to agricultural extension farmers to more actively target the women farmers and to tailor their services to suit the “... multiple roles of women farmers” (232). Tailoring, food processing and conservation are cited as particularly suitable to the multiple roles of women since they can be home-based income generating activities. This does reflect the common feeling in Kenya that women are homemakers.

The second recommendation is quoted here in full:

In view of the fact that many women farmers remain unaware of the facilities offered by such specialised agencies as the Agricultural Finance Corporation, The Agricultural Development Corporation and the Co-operative Bank, among others, it is important that these organisations adjust to the reality of the rural situation and ensure that their services reach women farmers (232).

What the document is alluding to is the fact that Kenyan women, in spite of being the major workers in the agricultural industry, cannot easily access credit. The 1994 –1996 development plan puts it more candidly. The development plan gives six ways in which women's participation in agriculture could be promoted. It says that one of the ways in which women's production potential could be improved would be:

improving women's access to and control of resources, especially land which is the main factor of production in agriculture. Customarily, inheritance of property including real estate is biased against women, husbands being the legally acknowledged title holders. However, with the recent changes in succession laws, women even when married should be able to buy and sell land under their own names (Republic of Kenya 1994,128).

In spite of the changes in the constitution referred to here, many women are still not able to acquire land. While they can buy and sell land now, many of the cultures do not allow women to inherit land. In any case by the time these laws were changed land was already in the hands of men. Financial institutions unfortunately, though understandably, want collateral before advancing loans and most Kenyans have no other fixed assets except land. What this means is that women cannot take development loans without going through their husbands. Women farmers also cannot feel secure about the lands that they farm. There have been cases where men have taken loans using the family piece of land without telling their wives. The wives learn about it too late when *their* land is being auctioned as a result of the failure of these men to pay up. The word *their* is highlighted here because in essence men are, culturally, only meant to be *custodians* and not *owners* (Kenyatta 1938, 9) as is implied by their unilateral decisions. Kenyatta relates a complex custodianship because it did allow the custodian, always a man, to sell the land, but even then he would do it in his capacity as a custodian and not

as owner. Admittedly, this custodianship was patriarchal. However, the men were meant to pass “ownership” to their wives by cultivating portions of the land and giving them to their various wives who would become “owners” of those portions. Selling of land was ceremonial and ritualistic. The buyer and seller would have to take oaths before elders. The seller, under oath, would testify that the land he was selling indeed belonged to him and that he had agreed to sell it to the buyer at the stated value. The buyer would likewise declare under oath that he was willingly buying the said piece of land and that he would give the number of sheep and goats asked for. According to Kenyatta no man would sell “his land without consulting [his sons] unless he was a very bad man, who did not care about his family” and that such “[c]ases [were] very rare in the Gikuyu community, but when it occurred the elders of the village or district would intervene and plead with the father for the welfare of his children” (31-32). That way women remained essentially in control of land as a means of production. The practice of holding title deeds, introduced by colonialism, has made it possible for men to enact land transactions in bars without the sanction of society, which has severely affected women.

Education has been another major contribution to women’s disempowerment in agricultural activities. Statistics show that women are outnumbered in terms of enrolment right from primary school to university. *The Report of the Presidential Committee on Employment* (1991) records that as of 1991 the enrolment of girls in primary schools was forty-nine percent. According to the National Development Plan 1994-1996, in 1992 the ratios of girls to boys were as follows: 97:100 in primary school; 75:100 in high school and 37:100 in the universities. It is clear that the dropout rate is much higher for girls than for boys. Some of the reasons for this high drop-out rate include financial constraints coupled with the cultural tendency to educate boys

rather than girls when resources are scarce, teenage pregnancies, and forced marriages in some communities, especially amongst the Maasai.

What this means is that there are more relatively illiterate women in the rural areas than men, since higher education tends to be the ticket to white collar jobs mainly found in the cities. Without adequate follow up those women who drop out of primary and secondary schools easily relapse into illiteracy. It is for this reason that the *Report of the Presidential Committee on Employment* (1991, 232) recommends that "...out-of-school education programmes are required to increase literacy among the illiterate and ensure that the drop-outs do not lapse into illiteracy".

One of the saddest ways in which women are exploited is found in payments for cash crops such as tea. In Murang'a district, where I come from, women are the main pickers and marketers of tea. The Kenya Tea Development Authority pays the farmers little amounts of money monthly and then pays them a lump sum at around October. This is popularly known as "tea boom" or "bonus". Some years ago farmers used to get paid in cash and from their own tea buying centres. Then, the women used to merely walk up to the centres on pay-day and use their thumbs to sign for the money. Now things have changed and the farmers have been forced to open up bank accounts. Almost always the bank accounts are opened in the name of the husband and he becomes the sole signatory. Some men have been known to go to the bank after "tea boom" has been credited to their accounts, withdraw the money and disappear to Nairobi or Murang'a town where they literally spend all the money on beer and prostitutes only to return home penniless. Illiteracy makes it difficult for women to travel to towns where the banks are mainly located to open accounts or to keep track of their husbands' spending.

Illiteracy, though by no means the only cause, also means that women are very poorly represented in the civil service. In 1991, it was estimated that women only took twenty-one percent of the jobs in the civil service. Those in senior management jobs only accounted for nine percent of the senior management positions (Report of the Presidential Committee on Employment). After the 1997 general elections not a single woman was named to the cabinet. This is in spite of the fact that the president created a ministry of women and youth affairs that did not last a month. The lumping together of women and the youth may also be seen as suggestive of the frivolity with which the government treats women. To make matters worse, the Ministry had a male cabinet minister while it lasted. Only one woman was named as an assistant minister and one as a permanent secretary. Inequity in terms of male-female representation in the civil service is still acute.

Another feature that has affected gender relations in Kenya is rural-urban migration. In many ways this phenomenon has its roots in colonialism. First, it was colonialism that introduced a cash economy. Secondly, colonialism decreed that tax should be collected per household, which meant that men were responsible for paying tax since women ordinarily did not build their own houses. The hut tax therefore meant that men, who were traditionally seen as the heads of families, had to work and earn money. Indeed, according to Tignor (1976), even when tax was introduced for all adults over sixteen years old, men were still the ones expected to pay the tax since traditionally it was men's responsibility to meet such expenses. Since this was colonialism's way of obtaining cheap labour, the cumulative effect was that it was men who moved in search of paid labour while women remained behind to take care of homes. Thirdly when colonialists introduced formal education, their aim was mainly to produce artisans for their industries, clerks for their businesses and foremen for their farms and other

business concerns. The targets were men. In Kikuyuland, cultural traditions such as female circumcision saw women denied education in missionary schools if they chose to be circumcised. In an attempt to arrest the practice the missionaries would bar circumcised girls from their schools. The result was a higher number of boys than girls being educated and hence becoming eligible for white-collar jobs. Fourthly, formal education has made Kenyans value white-collar jobs rather than manual work, one of the reasons being that white-collar jobs paid more money. Lastly, since industries where white-collar jobs are obtainable are mainly found in towns; and women are culturally regarded as homemakers, men find it easier to leave the rural village to go and work in towns. They are therefore resident in towns during the week and travel to their rural homes over the weekends and holidays.

Rural-urban migration has meant that many women have been forced by circumstance to become the heads of their families. Cohen and Odhiambo (1989) say that women in Siaya district have become heads of their families due to two reasons: migration of male labour; and the death of many Luos due to road accidents. Those men die on the roads travelling to Nakuru, Nairobi, Mombasa and other towns where they work. Luo land is also known to have many men dying of the AIDS virus as a result of men's sexual activities away from home. The situation is the same in many other parts of the country. The only difference may be in terms of degree. The cumulative effect on women has been both positive and negative. Some women have become enslaved on rural farms, doing all the agricultural work alone and having to shoulder all the family responsibilities. However, for others, their being alone at home means that they have become the decision-makers. They have become the controllers of not merely the factors of production, namely land, but also the products of labour. They have begun to realise their leadership and entrepreneurial potential and are therefore not willing to be

pushed around any more. Many of them see their economic activities as being in competition with those of their husbands. As a result one may argue that rural/urban migration does lead to gender consciousness. There has not been enough research in this area and some of these women's consciousness may never get known about.

One of the most gender sensitive comments I ever heard from a woman in Kenya came from a rural semi-literate woman. She and my mother were great friends. Her husband left our rural home and went to Nairobi to become a white man's cook. While he was away, tea as a cash crop was introduced in our area and this woman decided to plant it. They had a huge farm and she used quite a big part of it for this purpose. Soon she was receiving monthly payments for her crop. She would hire both male and female labour and pay them according to how much tea each one harvested rather than on an hourly or daily basis. She then heard that her husband was building a permanent house in Nairobi. She decided to build one at her home which she said would be in competition with the one that her husband was building in Nairobi. Building a concrete house in Murang'a, which is a hilly district and where roads are built on ridges, is very difficult, especially for those living down the valleys where there are no roads. It meant that she would have to pay the workers for carrying sand, cement, building stones, and concrete on a daily basis. The reason was that the nature of the land dictated that different means of carrying the materials be used. On level ground they would use wheelbarrows, while on the steep slopes they would either just roll down what could be rolled or simply place the materials on branches, sacks or dried cow hides and pull them down the slopes. There was no way, therefore, that she could pay them in terms of the amount of material that each carried every day, since they were doing a collectively co-ordinated task. Some would be at the steepest place rolling the materials down hill, others would be waiting for the material on the level ground with wheelbarrows, while others would be

waiting with branches, sacks and dried cow hides ready to pull them down the not too steep hills.

This lady decided, against common practice then, to pay all the workers, men and women, equal pay for a day's work. In other places, for a day's work men would be paid more money than women would. Some women, including my mother, in my presence, decided to ask her why she was doing that. She answered: *kari muchuthi ndiragura*. That is a very rude thing to say, especially in the presence of a small boy. Kikuyus find it vulgar to mention genitals using their literal names. It is impossible for me to translate all the emotions that that statement carries. A direct translation would be something like "Is it a penis that I am buying?" That statement caused a lot of mirth between my mother and her women friends and I was to hear it many times as they celebrated that woman's disdainful regard for men. This woman had never heard of sexual politics or even the word feminism but she was, in my opinion, as much of a feminist as anybody could be.

Culturally, the various ethnic groups in Kenya have different ways in which they facilitate either the empowerment or the disempowerment of women. Among the Luo, for example, one of the issues that keeps recurring is the phenomenon of wife inheritance. If a man dies, his wife is inherited by one of his kinsmen, preferably one of his brothers. It is argued by some that the purpose of the practice was to ensure that the children left behind had someone to take care of them. Another argument is that without it women would lose the property previously owned by the husband, since inheritance laws would not allow a woman to inherit her husband's property. Cohen and Odhiambo (1992) discuss the issue of wife inheritance or what they call the "levirate". They relate the story of Wambui Otieno who, being a Kikuyu woman whose Luo husband had died,

found the practice vulgar and revolting, while the Luo wanted to make sure that she underwent the ritual even though she had passed childbearing age. Apparently, when a woman had passed childbearing age she was meant to undergo some other ritual that Cohen and Odhiambo identify as euphemistically referred to as giving the woman tobacco, or in these modern days, a cigarette. In a real sense it means to give the woman a “fuck”. It would seem that once a woman had passed childbearing age, a “fuck”(63) was all she needed so she could be saved the need to be inherited. In an “afterpiece” in Cohen and Odhiambo’s book *Sally Folk More* shows that the practice is coming under scrutiny in this era of AIDS, for the woman being inherited may be a carrier of the AIDS virus.

Other ethnic groups may not have similar practices but that does not mean that they do not have customs that affect women both negatively and positively. The practice of paying and receiving what is variously known as bride price or dowry is found in almost all communities in Kenya. In a research carried out by Berg-Schlosser (1984) among seven Kenyan ethnic groups, all the studied groups were found to engage in this cultural practice that is sometimes used to reduce women to mere commodities to be haggled about, with prices agreed without their consent. Among the Kikuyu, for example, the process of determining the dowry was, and still is, a male dominated affair. When the women are invited they are generally expected to agree with what the elders say. The Maasai marry off a girl long before she matures. Gachukia (1995) has documented the experience of Priscilla Nangurai, a headmistress of a school in Maasai land, who is at times forced to go on “retrieval missions” to try and bring Maasai girls taken for circumcision back to school. Those girls can at times be as young as ten years old yet their fathers have already received their dowry. That is one of the reasons why we do not have many educated Maasai women. Wife-beating among the Maasai, the Luhya,

and other ethnic groups is taken as a cultural prerogative. Men have been known to express their right to “discipline” their wives even in such high places as parliament.

I will be arguing in this thesis that no matter how obnoxious *some* of these customs may appear to be to those who are uninitiated, it would be unwise to merely call for their being jettisoned. There are of course those, like wife-beating, that simply constitute a violation of human rights and which should be treated as crime. However there are others, such as bride price, polygamy, female circumcision and wife inheritance, whose deconstruction and reconstruction must be carefully negotiated otherwise the exercise may leave the women more vulnerable than they were in the context of these institutions. Indeed it shall become apparent as we study women’s writing from Kenya that some of these so-called oppressive institutions can be used, and have actually been used, to provide for women’s organising and as an empowering forum. Cohen and Odhiambo (1989) have demonstrated how women have used their culturally defined gender coded roles to engage in what Cohen and Odhiambo call a “therapeutic economy” (89). Women in Luo land are reputed to be powerful as far as traditional medicine is concerned. That is a role that is not by and large distinguished from witchcraft. Grace Ogot employs the potency of medicine women/witches as a motif of women’s agency in her short stories examined here in chapter four. It is instructive that according to Cohen and Odhiambo (1989) the women therapists are paid in money, goats, cattle and other farm produce which in essence empowers them economically. In Mombassa, Stobel (1979,78) reports that “... women compensated for their exclusion from Islamic public affairs through activity in unorthodox or non-Islamic cults. Women predominated in spirit possession cults which orthodox Muslim leaders disdained or condemned.” According to Stobel the women would get themselves possessed by a spirit which could not be exorcised unless certain demands were met, which in most

cases simply amounted to what the lady wanted her husband to do but what she could not persuade him to. Admittedly this is not the best way to have things done, but it cannot be ignored that it did lead to positive action. Witchcraft, spirit possession, religion and appeal to the divine seem to have been used by women to empower themselves. It may be possible that that is why, as Hoehler-Fatton (1996) found, that the Roho religion, mainly dominated by Luos, has found fertile ground in western Kenya. In her words, “[m]embers of... Roho churches view themselves as custodians of the spirit. They carry on a tradition of spirit possession and mediumship that is still an important aspect of Luo culture” (xiv). Traditionally women, and especially old ones, were respected as healers who used mystical powers. It is easy for Luos to relate the phenomenon of spirit possession to mystical powers and hence find it acceptable that women should be active in those churches where mystical experiences such as trances are primary. Indigenised churches (which means they give Christianity indigenous interpretations) such as the Roho religion and the Legio Maria, as seen in Cohen and Odhiambo (1989), Hoehler-Fatton (1996) and Strobel (1979), taken together, seem to allow for women’s agency much more than mainstream religions such as Christianity and Islam. Among the Luo, for example, the Roho religion and Legio Maria, which are break-away groups from the Anglican and Catholic mainstream churches respectively, seem to have transformed the traditional old woman healer into a divine healer capable of “seeing” things through the Holy Spirit. Women leaders in these churches are therefore acceptable because they assert themselves using existing traditional structures. In this context, it does seem to me that an indigenised or Afrocentric approach to feminism will be the most effective way to handle women’s liberation in Africa as it is likely to lead to fewer cultural conflicts. If traditional structures have been used in churches to empower women, though perhaps more by accident rather than design, it can also be done in other areas.

Research on Kenyan women's agency is mainly concentrated in the colonial period and that which is directly related to the colonial experience. Key among these researches is Presley's (1992) and Kanogo's (1987) retrieval of women's involvement in the Mau Mau¹ movement in the struggle against colonial domination. There are other studies by anthropologists, sociologists and historians that deal with Kenyan women from the vantagepoint of these disciplines. Little, however, has been done in the field of literature and women's creative writing and that is what this research aims to contribute to. O'Barr (1987), Delgado (1997), Matzke (1996), Ciarunji (1987) Wendo (1997) and Stratton (1994) are some of the few studies that have specifically dealt with Kenyan women's writing. Although there have been debilitating traditions and structures that make women's empowerment very difficult, it will become clear that women's resistance to oppression in Kenya did not begin with colonialism and has not been limited or structured by the need to respond to colonialism.

Kabira (1993) has expressed this position most forcibly. In an article entitled "Gender and Ideology: The Cultural Context", which is mainly about Kenya, she says:

We are arguing here that resistance to oppression does not begin with our generation. Let it be clear that this has been going on for a long time and we are following on our mother's footsteps. We are standing on their shoulders so we can articulate issues a little better (31).

The struggle for women's liberation in Africa has been attacked by critics who argue that it is anti-African traditions. While conceding that there are traditions that women's liberation of necessity must question, redefine and at times repudiate, I would like to suggest that patriarchy has taken unfair advantage of African traditions to exploit and

¹ The reference to the Mau Mau in this thesis is without the negative connotations sometimes attached to it by some who argue that it was an atavistic group that engaged in terrorist activities. I use the term "Mau Mau" in its widely accepted Kenyan perspective, that it refers to freedom fighters against British imperialism, who were particularly angered by the colonialists dispossession of African people's land.

oppress women. This has led many western critics of African societies to assume that the institutions were inherently flawed. It seems to me that a critical examination of many African traditions shows a potential provision of the mechanisms for women's empowerment. I look at women's literature that has examined institutions such as polygamy, religion, female circumcision, the family and in particular motherhood, to point toward women's liberation.

Various ethnic communities have different mythological and legendary explanations about how women came to be a subordinated group in their respective societies. This thesis, though embracing the wide concept "Kenya," particularly concentrates on two communities: the Luo and the Kikuyu. The reason for this bias is that these communities were the most severely affected by colonialism, while in terms of education they became the earliest beneficiaries. What this means is that most fiction writers, be they male or female, are from those communities. The best known female writer in Kenya is Grace Ogot who is Luo, while the best known male writer is Ngugi wa Thiong'o who is Kikuyu. Since Luo mythology is examined in my chapter on Grace Ogot, I propose to use the Kikuyu here to demonstrate that traditional mythologies are also repositories of women's empowerment and not merely parameters that rationalise their exploitation.

According to Kikuyu mythology, described in detail by Kenyatta (1938), Kikuyu society was originally matriarchal. The myth has it that in the beginning God created a man called Gikuyu and then provided him with a beautiful wife that he named Mumbi, meaning creator or moulder. They begot nine daughters and no son. Gikuyu was very disturbed by this state of affairs and so he sought the help of God. Kenyatta records that God told him:

Go and take one lamb and one kid from your flock. Kill them under the big fig tree (*mokoyo*) near your homestead. Pour the blood and the fat of the two animals on the trunk of the tree. Then you and your family make a big fire under the tree and burn the meat as a sacrifice to me, your benefactor. When you have done this take home your wife and daughters. After that go back to the sacred tree, and there you will find nine handsome young men who are willing to marry your daughters under any condition that will please you and your family(4).

Gikuyu did as he was told and when he returned he found nine handsome men whom he took home and introduced to his family. He invited them to spend a night in his home and when the issue of marriage was discussed the following morning, he said that he would only give his consent if the men would agree to live in his homestead under a matriarchal system. The young men could not resist the offer since they found the daughters very beautiful. They married the daughters and lived together under one family name, *mbari ya Mumbi*, in honour of their mother Mumbi. According to Kenyatta the mythology holds that women held superior positions in society and practised polyandry. However, women became ruthless and domineering. Many men were put to death for committing adultery and other offences. They were also “...subjected to all kinds of humiliation and injustice (6)”. In Kenyatta’s words:

Men were indignant at the way in which the women treated them, and in their indignation they planned revolt against the ruthless women’s administration of justice. But as the women were physically stronger than the men of the time, and also better fighters, it was decided that the best time for a successful revolt would be during the time when the majority of women, especially their leaders were in pregnancy (6).

The men, after holding a secret meeting, went to their homes and at the agreed time they began to behave very nicely to their wives and eventually managed to get them all pregnant at the same time. They then waited for six months and executed their revolt when the majority of the brave and strong women were weak due to pregnancy. They met little resistance and quickly moved to abolish the system of polyandry and established polygamy. Eurocentric scholars wanting to read a simple mythologisation

of women's inferior status in society usually tell the myth only up to that point. This is what Presley (1992) and Berg-Schlosser do. Kenyatta however tells us that while the men managed to change the name of the tribe from "*Rorere rwa mbari ya Moombi to Rorere rwa Gikuyu*" (7) they met resistance when they tried to change the clan names which had been based on the names of the nine Gikuyu women. He tells us that:

...the women were infuriated and strongly decided against the change which they looked upon as a sign of ingratitude on the part of the men. The women frankly told the men that if they dared to eliminate the names which stood as recognition that women were the original founders of the clan system, the women would refuse to bear any more children. And to start with, they would kill all the *male* [emphasis mine] children who were born as a result of the treacherous plan of the revolt (7-8).

The threat scared the men and therefore they did not change the clan system, which to this day is still matriarchal. There are obvious points in this myth that mirror the tendency to portray women as a passive group. The girls' fate regarding their marriage is apparently decided without their being consulted. We are told that the daughters were happy to have male companions, but it is not clear how early they became involved in the discussions about their own marriage. God is also only seen as communicating with man and not with woman. The most glaring example of women's construction as a distinct social group for suppression, however, is the fact that it was their sexuality and capacity for motherhood that the men exploited to disempower them. I suggest that in the same breath we need to take cognisance of their having used the same construction to find solidarity and fight against complete marginalisation. They identified the men as the aggressors and sought to hit at them specifically by threatening to kill all the boys, born as a result of the treacherous conspiracy by the men, as opposed to all the children. They realised that their sexuality and capacity for motherhood could be used as centres of power. Finally, logic would seem to suggest that if the men found the need to subvert matriarchy because of women's autocracy and injustice, then women would be completely justified to seek the deconstruction of patriarchy if men prove autocratic and

oppressive. In other words it should be morally wrong, in the context of this myth, to use tradition to oppress either gender among the Kikuyu. The myth also suggests that resistance to oppression is not a foreign phenomenon. Historically, therefore, we can argue that women's resistance to injustice can be traced to the beginnings of time amongst the Kikuyu. The activities of organisations such as Maendeleo ya Wanawake, the National Council of Women of Kenya, Kangemi Women's Empowerment Centre, the Women's Political Caucus, the National Commission on the Status of Women, the Kenya League of Women Voters and other groups can therefore not be read as institutions entirely powered by foreign ideologies.

In this thesis I suggest that women's resistance to oppression, which is evident both in myth and history, is proof that the feminist spirit has been, and still is, present in Kenya. By the feminist spirit here I mean the deliberate and informed engagement with institutions and structures that lead to the oppression of women because of their sex, with a view to demolishing those institutions. There are arguments by women suggesting the presence of resistant and militant women in Africa as far back as the sixth century. Kelawole (1997,44) says that "[w]omen's challenging leadership since the first century in some parts of Africa has been well documented by Sweetman" and that "[t]his includes women prototypes of self-assertion such as Kahina of the Magreb in North Africa, a powerful ruler between 575 and 702". Ali Mazrui (1993) has also given an account of one of the earliest concrete examples of revolutionary women. Her name was Dona Beatrice, alias Kimpa Vita, and she was burned alive with a child somewhere on the border of present-day Angola and Zaire, now the Republic of Congo. Hers was a struggle to indigenise Christianity while validating Africa's authenticity. Mazrui tells us that her argument was based on three convictions: 1) that many of the Disciples of Christ were not Hebrews but his African companions; 2) that Jesus neither

prohibited polygamy nor polygyny; and 3) that the virgin birth was not a monopoly of the mother of Jesus, for an African woman, with God's intervention, was as capable as any one in Bethlehem of producing a child while still a virgin.

The theological accuracy of her argument is beside the point. Although she was not a Kenyan, she serves as a good beginning point to debunk the myth of African women as submissive, silently suffering, apolitical and bearers of a false consciousness. This should be seen as consistent with Kelawole's argument that "[t]he myth that African women are free and need not struggle for self-esteem is as dangerous as the myth of African women's total effacement and invisibility" (51). It is in the context of this statement by Kolawole and therefore an awareness of the need to avoid both fallacies that I now turn to examine a few individual women who could be regarded as repositories of a feminist ideal and spirit in Kenya. Njau and Mulaki have recorded instances when women's actions clearly indicate that they identified themselves as a separate and distinct social group even though part and parcel of the wider society. An example is a woman called Ndiko wa Githura. According to Njau and Mulaki(1984), Ndiko was born in 1884 and rose to become a powerful leader who was respected by her people. She was a propertied woman and had male servants whose wives she paid dowry for. In many cultures in Africa it is the man who pays dowry. Ideally and culturally, a father paid dowry for his sons. In Ndiko's case it means that she paid dowry for men who were her servants rather than sons and that she consequently had authority over these new wives just as she had had authority over their husbands. She is known to have defied a male chief who had ordered her to stop a circumcision ritual that was being held in her compound.

Her life seems to put into doubt Kabira's argument that the Gikuyu did not make a provision for women to become leaders. It also demonstrates that women were under no obligation to blindly obey men. Finally it demonstrates that the Gikuyu social structure made room for women to resist male autocracy. Men and women had domains of power and just as women could not hijack and direct men's constituents of power, men were not expected to intervene in those of women. It is interesting to note that women were the power barons in matters pertaining to female circumcision. This is contrary to the view commonly held by many western critics of female circumcision as simply an invention of the patriarchy to curtail women's sexuality. This dimension is explored in depth in chapter six of this thesis.

Women's power should not be seen to have been limited to the Kikuyus only. Njau and Mulaki also record the experience of a Meru woman who rose to power in the colonial period and who commanded respect from Meru men and women as well as the colonial administration. Her name was Ciokaraine. Her rise to power is interesting because it occurred during the struggle for independence, a period whose history has, until recently when women such as Kanogo (1987) began to question it, been largely written as if it were solely a male affair. It was an attempt to retrieve women's silenced or buried involvement in the struggle that inspired Presley's (1992) book. In 1952, a state of emergency was declared in Kenya with the intention of arresting the progress of the Mau Mau fighters. These fighters were hiding in the Mount Kenya forests alongside which the Meru live. The colonialists alleged that the Mau Mau rebels were using the yams and banana farms alongside these forests as a hiding place. Through their African male chiefs the colonialists attempted to make the Meru uproot the food crops.

Cikoraine protested and led a resistance against uprooting. She argued that that would effectively be killing the citizens and that men were silent on the issue since none of them had ever died giving birth. The colonialists and the men attempted to silence her but she was defiant. Finally her position triumphed and she was consequently made an assistant chief between 1954 and 1959. Her experience is an example of the play between what Nnaemeka (1997a) calls motherhood as experience and motherhood as an institution. As an institution and as constructed by the men it is debilitating. On the other hand, as an African woman's experience, it can be liberating. In awareness of her position and experience as mother, Ciokaraine did not choose defiant silence nor was she silenced. She spoke against the oppressive male hegemony consisting of African and colonial leaders. Motherhood did not lead to silence but to voicing.

Her appeal to motherhood effectively silenced the men. They knew that that was her constituent of power. Motherhood in this context was not a decentering and disempowering encumbrance. It became the means to chieftaincy and in turn expanded Ciokaraine's sphere of influence. An occurrence such as this, in my opinion, is reason enough to justify revisiting and revising that interpretation of African women's literature as one that posits motherhood as oppressive and worthy of repudiation.

The next two women I shall consider together as they were actively involved in the struggle against colonial rule. The first one is Mekatilili whose account is recorded by Njau and Mulaki while the second one is Mary Nyanjiru, whose history appears in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* and in Kabira and Nzioki's (1993) *Celebrating Women's Resistance*. Mary Nyanjiru's case almost seems to suggest that women's issues were at the centre of the struggle for Kenya's freedom. She came into prominence in 1920 after Harry Thuku was arrested. Harry Thuku was one of the pioneering freedom fighters.

According to Macgoye (1984, 29) Harry Thuku was arrested for speaking against “forced labour of women on the roads.” She says that although he remained unmarried for many years he was “...particularly sensitive to the problems of women and so gained their support and helped them perceive their power and to take political action” (30). In Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*, Nyanjiru is presented as having been incensed by men’s impotency against colonial oppression and therefore challenged them to swap their trousers for the women’s skirts. She was threatening to lead the demand for Harry Thuku’s release if men were too cowardly to do it. According to Berg-Schlosser (1984) an eyewitness is recorded to have said that Nyanjiru “... lifted her dress right over her shoulders and shouted to the men: You take my dress and give me your trousers. You men are cowards. What are you waiting for? Our leader is in there. Let’s get him” and that “[t]he hundreds of women trilled their *ngemi* in approbation and from that moment trouble was inevitable” (232). There was an instant reaction to her appeal by the crowd that had gathered. The colonial authorities also reacted instantly and with brute force. Several people were killed and Nyanjiru was one of them. Nyanjiru was one of the first grains of wheat that fell to the ground and quickly blossomed into the vast wheat field of freedom fighters. She should be accorded as much respect as Dedan Kimathi, Jomo Kenyatta, Oginga Odinga and others who fought for Kenya’s independence.

Mekatilili’s history is recorded by Njau and Mulaki. She led the protest against colonialism among the Giriama in the now widely publicised Giriama resistance of 1913 and 1914. In 1913, she was detained in Kisii in South Nyanza province. On the 14th of January 1914, she and a fellow prisoner called Wanje escaped from the detention camp and made a daring walk back to the coast hundreds of kilometres away. Mekatilili and Nyanjiru prove that women were at the centre of the liberation struggle, both

secretly and publicly. Ngugi, in *A Grain of Wheat*, records how women smuggled food and guns into the forests. Presley's (1992) research confirms Ngugi's fictional representation. Women were not simply passive, patiently suffering homemakers, but were also revolutionary leaders.

Women's resistance to oppression in Kenya is not only limited to the distant past. In 1992 a group of them staged a hunger strike at Uhuru Park at a place now referred to as "The Freedom Corner" in their honour. In spite of the heavy military force that was unleashed on them by the Kenyan government they did not give up. They were demanding the release of political prisoners, among them the internationally renowned human rights activist, Koigi wa Wamwere. One of the women was his mother. In 1989, Wangari Maathai, the first woman to acquire a Ph.D in Kenya, actively, publicly and openly opposed the government's and the ruling party K.A.N.U's attempt to build a Kenya Times Media Complex at Uhuru Park. She won. This is particularly interesting because K.A.N.U is a predominantly male structure, and also that it was only through the leadership of Wangari Maathai that NCWK (National Council of Women of Kenya) had once taken an activist stance in championing women's rights.

Wambui Otieno perhaps fought the most public battle that a woman has ever fought on Kenyan soil. Between December 1986 and May 1987, she waged war, almost single-handedly, against the Luo community and specifically against the Umira Kager Clan. Wambui Otieno had lost her husband, Silvano Melea Otieno, a Luo and a lawyer by profession, whom she wanted to bury at their farm in Upper Matasia, Ngong, near Nairobi. While Wambui insisted that her husband's wish was to be buried at Upper Matasia, the Luo, and specifically the Umira Kager clan, insisted on burying the man in Nyalgunga, Nyamira village, Siaya, in Western Kenya in accordance with Luo custom.

There was a court case that Wambui won and lost. In the High Court, she won the right to bury her husband at Upper Matasia but she lost the case in a subsequent appeal by the Umira Kager clan in the Court of Appeal. Her husband was therefore buried against her will at Nyamira in Siaya on May 23, 1987. The issues involved were too many and too complex to be adequately dealt with in this thesis. Cohen and Odhiambo (1992) have recorded and expounded on many of them.

Here I focus in on what was seen as the feminist perspective of the case. Clearly Cohen and Odhiambo inscribe Wambui's position as feminist. They say:

As one closely examines Wambui Otieno's testimony on Luo culture, one recognises the relatively indistinct boundaries and continuities among various descriptive accounts of African culture, traditional society, and custom from the early writings of European women in Kenya-such as Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen) and Elspeth Huxley who were critical of what they perceived were patriarchal institutions and later writings of feminist scholars trained in the west...and such testimony as offered by Wambui Otieno, along with her statements outside of court (36).

According to Cohen and Odhiambo, many women, including Grace Ogot, one of the writers to be analysed in this study, did not support the feminist line adopted by Wambui. In their words, "...where Wambui's articulated position may have been read as developing along feminist lines, many influential women in Kenya chose other roads than the one they would have walked arm in arm with her" (36). The two in their "Luocentric book" (27), as it is described by John Lonsdale in the afterpiece published at the end of the book, interpret the outcome of the case as the silencing of Wambui. They fail, in my opinion, to admit that Wambui made her point whether or not her views gained currency in Kenya. They equally fail to acknowledge that Wambui's experience during that crisis can never be read as silence, not even silencing, because she was not, could not, and now can never be silenced. Their very book is an

immortalisation of Wambui's eloquence and that voicing will continue reverberating in consequent studies such as this one in the future.

I read several implications from her experience. First, that this indicates that the women of Kenya have battles to fight. This renders the argument about the irrelevance of feminism null and void. Secondly, the women of Kenya are not and do not choose to be passive and apolitical. Thirdly, women in Kenya realise that they must exercise negotiation polemic in their struggle for liberty, in the knowledge that repudiating some cultural practices would require tact, otherwise women might end up more severely handicapped. Many women therefore found it hard to walk arm in arm with Wambui. It is not surprising, after a careful examination, that she eventually lost the case. She did not necessarily lose because of a patriarchal and flawed legal system. The same system had been used to her advantage in the earlier hearing. She is more likely to have lost because neither her counsel nor herself, as the justices of the Court of Appeal revealed in admonishing Khaminwa, the counsel, took time to study and understand the Luo customary practices and beliefs.

In Cohen and Odhiambo's book, there are two transcripts of Grace Ogot's reaction to the Wambui Otieno case. One has it that "... in the 20th February 1987 issue [of *The Weekly Review*], that the Member of Parliament for Gem, Grace Ogot, had said that 'women wanted to see some changes in the traditions, and that widows should be respected' (34)". She was addressing mourners at the burial of another Luo man. The other is one based on a quotation taken from *The Weekly Review* on 6th March 1987. In a letter to the magazine she wrote:

During my brief speech as a close relative to the widow, Mrs Veronica Nyamodi, I took a contrary view to that expressed by Mzee Oginga Odinga. I thanked Mrs Nyamodi for giving her beloved husband a decent burial at Nyadhi village among her people. This had enabled the family and all relatives whom

Dr Nyamodi had loved and assisted in various ways to be close to their son during his last journey. Secondly, I reminded married women to always remember that the husbands they loved had a mother, father, sisters and brothers and the extended family. Finally, when commenting on Mrs Nyamodi's appeal to the plight of widows, I comforted her that, as she is highly educated and a trained lawyer by profession, we could work together and initiate discussions with our people with the view to bringing about changes in some outmoded customs affecting widows and their children (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992, 35).

This lengthy quotation is included here in full, deliberately, because it is very loaded. Indeed, I think its full impact will only be realised after a detailed study of Grace Ogot's works of fiction. We can, however at this time, take note of three things. First that she seems to contradict her earlier position in regard to the need for changes in some traditions so that the views of widows are respected even when those views may be in contradiction to common practice in society. However, in my opinion she does not, she only explicates it. Secondly, she boldly declares that her position differed with that of Oginga Odinga, who is known in Kenya as the father of opposition politics. Odinga is said to have told the mourners that "the attitude that members of the Luo community can only be buried in their ancestral homes was parochial and lacked a cosmopolitan outlook (35)". Odinga was then, among the Luo, iconoclastic. During the 1992 multiparty elections, nobody would have won a parliamentary seat in Luo land without Odinga's support. To oppose Odinga then and to go into print about it was very bold for Ogot the politician. She was of course in K.A.N.U and the views of her boss, President Moi, were known. However, her sentiments, taken in the context of her literary works, show consistency of thought.

Ogot clearly had taken time to think about what she wrote in *The Weekly Review*. Unfortunately Cohen and Odhiambo refuse to ascribe those sentiments to Grace Ogot alone and suggest that she wrote them in collaboration with others. This is typical of men writers who do not want to credit women with profound thoughts. It should not be

forgotten that Grace Ogot and Asenath Odaga have both been accused of not having written their own novels. What we must take on board, and which is my third observation in reference to the Wambui Otieno case, is Grace Ogot's suggestion, in her commentary, that there are issues, such as burial, that are not individual. Her argument is that married women must not think that their husbands solely belong to them, but that the husbands also belong to their mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers and other members of the extended family. In other words the women just cannot afford purely individualistic lives.

The fourth and final point, for now, is that Ogot suggests that educated women, who may or may not be feminists, should work with leaders to negotiate with their communities for change, acceptable to society, of outmoded customs. Herein lies her explication of the statement that she had seemed to contradict. She was acknowledging that indeed there are social structures that were actually institutionalisations of women's marginalisation and disempowerment but also that no individual or group could dismantle them singly. She was, in my opinion, advocating what Nnaemeka (1995) has called nego-feminism. Nnaemeka describes negofeminism as gender activism that negotiates with society. It seems to me that Ogot was calling for a feminism that would not necessarily repudiate culture, but would fight for its reworking. She was implying that a useful ideology is the one that springs from the practical demands of a people because it becomes ingrained in their consciousness. It becomes acceptable. For Africans, it becomes Afrocentric.

Feminism and Afrocentrism should, in the final analysis, be seen as consciousness constructs. This is not to say that they are necessarily consciously constructed, but that they have become so ingrained in the people's psyche that they constitute a worldview.

Africans may not question the constructs as of themselves, but the process of their construction must be actively engaged with. This must be done because people from different cultural and regional backgrounds in Africa and her diaspora structure ideologies from their own perspectives, meaning that what is feminist and Afrocentric in one community may not necessarily be so in another. Some Afrocentric scholars, especially male ones, either ignore feminism or treat it simply as a competing discourse. The effect of this approach is that the African woman's voice is marginalised or silenced in Afrocentric scholarship, or that she is written and inscribed by foreigners into Eurocentric feminist discourses. Ngugi and Soyinka, for example, hardly ever mention the word. Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubike (1980) do not factor the philosophy in their call for the decolonization of African literature. Ojo-Ade's (1983) article constitutes a thinly veiled portrayal of the philosophy as foreign and in competition to Afrocentricity.

When Achebe wrote *Things Fall Apart*, he was convinced that colonialism had put a knife to the things that held Africans, and specifically the Ibo of Nigeria, together, and that therefore the society was falling apart. Florence Stratton (1994) has now written to suggest that Achebe's world was not a women's world and that Grace Ogot has created the women's world in which men fall apart. The implication of this feminist Eurocentric scholar is that African women, if their world did not fall apart, lost little or nothing with the advent of colonialism. That would suggest that the women did not have a comprehension of their world that produced what they would have called their African essence and if they did, then it was unaffected by colonialism. This is a scenario that I find inconceivable.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to concern itself with evaluating Achebe's achievements and/or failures. Traore (1997) has done an excellent job in reference to the mother principle in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. However Florence Stratton's study does raise the need to re-examine feminism in the context of Afrocentricity. Where do the women of Africa fit in this academic tug of war? Are they silent and/or ignorant of the matter? Soyinka (1976) says that: "we black Africans have been invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonialism - this time by a universal humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of their world and their history, their social neurosis and their value system. It is time clearly to respond to this new threat, each in his own field" (x).

This is a call to Afrocentrism. Ngugi (1993) calls it "... the struggle for the right to name the world for ourselves" (3). He puts it more articulately when voicing the debate he led that sought the renaming and the restructuring of the English Department at the University of Nairobi and its programmes. The Department was then, in the late 1960s, organised "on the basis that Europe was the centre of the universe" (8). In leading the debate that was raging in East Africa led by himself in Nairobi, Grant Kamenju in Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, and Pio and Van Zirimu in Makerere University in Uganda, Ngugi says "[t]he basic question was: from what base did African peoples look at the world? Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism? The question was not that of mutual exclusion between Africa and Europe but the basis and the starting point of their interaction", (8).

Two questions that arise from these views expressed by Ngugi and Soyinka will be addressed in this study: Have African women creative writers responded to the pressure

to construct themselves using Euro-American standards? Do African women have their own base from which they look at the world? It should be obvious that the two questions should be answered in the affirmative. Unfortunately, that affirmative answer is not reflected in Afrocentric scholarship that is largely male dominated or feminist studies that are largely Eurocentric. This study therefore examines Kenyan women's literature to demonstrate that African women are indeed concerned and are actively involved in Afrocentric issues from their own perspectives. In insisting that the Department of English at the University of Nairobi should allow for a multiplicity of centres from which the world could be defined, Ngugi argues that:

The department would therefore be recognising the obvious fact that knowing oneself and one's environment was the correct basis of absorbing the world; that there would never be only one centre from which to view the world but that different people in the world had their culture and environment as the centre (9).

Ngugi does not suggest that gender can be an Afrocentric centre but he does imply that a plurality of centres should be envisaged. It is also clear that he feels that the indigenous occupants of these centres should be given agency in defining the centres as well as a view of the world comprehensible from their location. Soyinka's call for a response "each in his own field" (1976, x) is an admission that the Afrocentric centre is not singular or monolithic but multiple. Multiplicity does not negate the concept Afrocentric which suggests an Africa that is known and which can be defined, albeit controversially. Appiah (1992) and Mudimbe (1988) have conducted detailed studies towards that end. What multiplicity suggests is that in our responses we need to define from what centre we speak or write. Indeed Soyinka (1993) has convincingly argued that in conceptualising Africa we need not be confined to what he calls "saline consciousness" (18). In other words we should not be overburdened by too much concern with an Africa limited by her borders. And yet it would be difficult to think of an Africa that would be meaningfully useful without taking into account her borders. Even the African in the African-American must make recourse to continental Africa

otherwise the concept African-American would not exist at all. In other words African-Americans as a social group derive their ontology from their historical connection with continental Africa.

Soyinka's suggestion is that "when we speak of a black African culture we refer clearly both to a sum of its various parts, and its unifying essence" (1993, 24). My suggestion here is that sometimes too much attention is given to the abstract, elusive and controversial "unifying essence" to the detriment of the various parts. Yet we cannot arrive at any unity of essence without summing up the various parts. It may be that it is this tendency in scholarship that made Appiah (1992) conclude that Africa conceptualised through race, history and metaphysics as the commonalities, does not exist or is incomprehensible. He has put it even more aptly in his attempt to debunk the myth of an African world in the nineteenth century. He says:

To speak of an African identity in the nineteenth century – if an identity is a coalescence of mutually responsive (if sometimes conflicting) modes of conduct, habits of thought and patterns of evaluation; in short, a coherent kind of human social psychology – would have been to give "airy nothing a local habitation and a name" (174).

Appiah does not leave it there for he follows his argument with the statement: "yet there is no doubt now, a century later, that an identity is coming into being" (174). It would be a mistake for the process of reconstructing this identity to attempt to sideline or ignore African women, for they are eloquent and active in creating space for themselves in this arena. Quite clearly then, rather than abandon the search for and the creation of an African world, which would be nihilistic and defeatist to say the least, we are well advised to make room for what I would call concentric circles of consciousness. This is a theoretical framework whose premise is that no definition or conceptualisation of the world, Eurocentric or Afrocentric, can be absolute. In other words no single centre can enable us to have, formulate or express an holistic conception of the world. Paul's wisdom in 1st Corinthians 13:9 rings true here: "For we know in part and we prophesy

in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part shall be done away with”.

Concentric circles of consciousness make us humble enough to acknowledge our incapacity to formulate a singular and holistic conception of the world, but also gives us courage to continue seeking knowledge, in the conviction that pieces of episteme do not carry equal weight or comprehensiveness. An individual therefore can express his view of the world, which obviously will have been influenced by his immediate environment, which in turn will have been influenced by other environments allied or close to it and on and on creating a wider and wider conception of the world. Concentric circles of consciousness are dialogic constructs. They are arrived at as a result of interaction of ideologies at the market place of ideas. Those market places are inescapably located in a multiplicity of places.

When Ngugi, for example, gave a lecture at the University of Leeds, The Arthur Ravenscroft Commonwealth lecture, on the 4th of December 1990, the worldview that he expressed cannot be divorced from his growing up in a small village in Limuru, Kenya. The worldview may not be the norm in Limuru, but that is only because Ngugi has widened the environments that have influenced him. In the context of the possibility of multiple centres from which to view the world, it is important that before speaking of an Afrocentric worldview, we define the centres from which we speak. This then is a good opportunity to begin the next task: to define Kenya as one of those centres and hence make the place of Kenya women's fiction easy to grasp. The history of Kenya and the history of Africa are parallel discourses. The Berlin Conference, the epitome of the scramble for Africa, has significance for present day Kenya. This is in spite of the fact that there was then no such thing as Kenya, whether we are thinking geopolitically

or in terms of nationalist consciousness. According to Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye (1984) the geopolitical construct that we now take for granted as Kenya did not come into existence until 1920 when the Kenya Colony Protectorate was established.

It may be of importance to note that Macgoye, the only woman in Kenya known to this writer to have tried to grapple with what it means to be Kenyan, is rarely mentioned as a Kenyan writer. She was not one of those interviewed by Adeola James (1990). Delgado (1997) does not mention her in his article entitled “Mother Tongues, and Childless Women: The Construction of Kenyan Motherhood “ although that is one of the subjects that she deals with, as shall become clear later. O’Barr (1987) has an article entitled “Feminist Issues in the Fiction of Kenya’s Women Writers” which does not discuss any of Macgoye’s works. Only in very recent times (Kurtz 1998, Simatei 2001,) have detailed studies on Macgoye as a Kenyan woman writer begun to emerge. I will be arguing that one of the reasons why Macgoye has been largely ignored in the criticism of Kenyan literature is because she does not fit into the generally accepted, stated or implied notion of what it means to be Kenyan.

Macgoye’s book (1984) is appropriately titled: *The Story of Kenya: A Nation in the Making*. Like Appiah, Macgoye suggests that Kenya is, like Africa, a colonial invention. Unlike him, however, she does not suggest that Kenyans cannot now found a nation and hence a nationalism that would be defined by her borders. Appiah (1992) argues that Africans never shared metaphysics or a cosmology. It would therefore be ridiculous, in his view, to invoke one in an attempt to capture Africanicity. His solution is that Africans should seek to formulate an identity based on the broad parameters of ecology, politics and economics. Although our concern here is not to interrogate Appiah’s discourse, it is useful to point out that the approach he gives in opposition to

race, history and metaphysics is problematic. It is difficult, if not impossible, to see how Africans can embrace ecology, economics and politics without thinking of metaphysics, race and history.

Macgoye's approach is much more feasible. First she concerns herself with a small entity: Kenya. If we can arrive at a Kenyan consciousness, it will be easier to map out possibilities and avenues towards theorising an African one. In an attempt to theorise a Kenyan identity, Macgoye begins by stating that by around 1884:

'Kenya' was inhabited by a number of peoples with different kinds of political and defensive organisations. They all knew their territories and were neighbours with communities of similar characteristics to the north, west, and south. They were by no means united but they had each other pretty well sized up (2).

There are two points here that are important and to which we need to pay extra attention: First that the spot now called Kenya was inhabited by different kinds of people who were by no means united but nevertheless shared some characteristics. This rings true to Wole Soyinka's (1993, 24) statement that "when we speak of a black African culture we refer clearly both to a sum of its various parts and its unifying essence". It is also in the same light that Molefi Asante's (1993) postulations in his introduction to *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity*, in which Soyinka's article quoted here appears, must be understood. Asante says that the articles in the book are united by the following issues: 1) the philosophical foundation and belief that the people of African descent share a common experience, struggle and origin; 2) that the people have a common response to the same rhythms, the same rituals, the same African sense, and; 3) that they are united in their harmony with nature, humanness and rhythm. These points are undoubtedly abstract and in need of concretisation via examples and further discourse. Unfortunately that is beyond the scope of this project. However, taken together with Macgoye's ideas, they suffice to indicate that the supposed pervasive disunity of the African people before the advent of colonialism is questionable.

The second point in Macgoye's quote is that they (the Kenyans that occupied that space now called Kenya) had one another pretty well sized up. This simply means that they were aware of, and to a certain extent understood each other. Mudimbe (1988) tells us that "Colonialism and colonisation basically means organisation, arrangement". Then he proceeds to inform us that colonialism and colonisation tended to "...transform non-European areas into fundamentally European constructs" (1). In other words, the so-called law and order introduced in the colonies was nothing but a European construct. Macgoye's point is that the people living in "Kenya" then were not without a consciousness that embraced the "we", meaning themselves, and the "other" meaning their neighbours.

Presley (1992) has shown that the Kikuyu, for example, did not only trade with the Kamba who are, like Kikuyus, Bantus, and with whom they share a metaphysics, but also with Maasais who are Nilotes and with whom they shared very little in terms of consciousness. They did not only trade but they also went to war with them. In these wars some people from both sides would sometimes be captured as prisoners of war. The prisoners of war were not killed. They were married and integrated into the communities that took them captive and later became useful interpreters in matters of trade.

What this means is that when colonialism created Kenya, it did not, as may be assumed, unite otherwise amorphous groups. On the contrary, it divided some that were previously united. Thanks to colonialism, now we have Maasais of Kenya as well as Tanzania, Luos in Kenya and in Uganda. These divisions have sometimes caused border tensions with countries like Uganda, Sudan and Somalia claiming bits of Kenya.

Colonialism meant that a lot of other people who were not indigenous to the region now called Kenya also came and settled there, had children and those children now have had their own children who know of no other place that they could call home. Macgoye is one such person. She was born in 1928 in Southampton, England. She came to Kenya in 1954, two years after there was the famous declaration of a state of emergency in an attempt to suppress the Mau Mau rebellion. This is the movement that is credited by many historians as having brought about Kenya's independence in 1963 and the consequent creation of the Republic of Kenya in 1964. Three years before independence, Macgoye married an indigenous Kenyan, Mr. D.G.W Oludhe Macgoye. With that kind of history she really should and indeed does understand the intricacies behind the formation of the Kenya nation.

In response to the fact that Kenya now “contains people of different races, languages and ways of life”, Macgoye poses the question: “ What chance does it [Kenya] have of achieving unity and the international power that comes from unity” (2). She gives two answers that are worth looking at. First she says:

Kenyans have as much chance as they want to have. It was the task and joy of Kenyans to win independence not for a tribe or a class or region but for that particular country they had chosen to build inside the lines on a map. In the same way it is the task and joy of Kenyans to give that country a meaning, a message, a strength (2).

This implies that the concept Kenya and the consciousness that goes along with it are still in the making today. As long as culture continues to be a dynamic phenomenon, interacting in a give-and-take dialectic with other cultures, the process of deconstruction and reconstruction will continue. Culture here is conceived in an all-inclusive sense where political, religious and sociological forces are involved in its construction.

Whatever at any one time can be regarded as a sum total and a fair representation of the totality of the Kenyan experience shall be construed as Kenyan consciousness.

This is by no means going to be an easy task, but we should not be daunted by its immensity and suffer a paralysis of the will to search for a Kenyan consciousness/identity. In Europe and America, as has been shown by Gates (1986) and Appiah (1992), the search for nationalism centred on commonalities of language and literature. That clearly would not work for Kenya. The foundation of the first wave of Kenyan nationalism, which was quite similar in the rest of Africa, centred on a common struggle against a common enemy: the struggle for freedom against colonial domination and oppression.

Amuka (1990) has captured the complexity of the situation most graphically. This is what he says in reference to the search for a common literature:

But the concept of Kenya literature is difficult to explain because of the multiplicity of languages in the country. One obvious way to understand it would be through investigation of Kenya's estimated forty-six (including English) different languages. This would inevitably lead to the conclusion that some forty-six sub-concepts of the literature exist. The other way would be the assumption that the forty-six languages have forty-six corresponding literatures (43).

It does not mean, in spite of this complication, that we can never talk of Kenyan literature. This is what Amuka finally says in regard to the issue:

When all the similarities and differences in the multiplicities of literature have been garnered, then we may usefully talk of a national literature. In the meantime we content ourselves with the already researched material (44).

What we learn here is simple: that the construction of the Kenyan nation is an ongoing process. Sifuna (1990) says that nationalism involves four main elements: a vision, a culture, solidarity and a policy. There definitely can be no vision, culture or solidarity

that can be constructed and succeed while ignoring women, who are now estimated to constitute fifty-two percent of the Kenyan population.

Macgoye's second answer to her own question deals with Amuka's misgivings. She says that "we have as much chance as almost any other country in the world. Most countries now have, and practically all have had at some time in history, differences of community, culture, and language". She proceeds to give the example of India which has eight languages and more than one hundred dialects; the former U.S.S.R which had more languages than one could count; and China, which in spite of having one language has very diverse cultures. Linguistically, the south and the north China can hardly communicate except orthographically because their pronunciation is so different.

Kenyans need not be limited by the Eurocentric obsession with conflating singularity in language and literature with nationhood. Gates (1985) has shown how that obsession was used to deny Africans their humanity because it was assumed that reason could only be expressed through writing. He records that in 1772, Phyllis Wheatley, a young African slave girl, had a hard time convincing the Euro-American world then that she had actually written poetry all by herself. In their opinion if she had, then it would prove that "... the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that the African was destined by nature to be a slave" (8). To them, to be able to write was a way of manifesting the capacity to be rational and hence human.

From a Euro-American point of view, writing was a way of naming the world and one might reasonably argue, bringing it into existence. It is not too far fetched to postulate that that is why the Europeans would talk of discovering America or Mt Kenya as if the

residents of Kenya had never seen it. They did not take cognisance of the fact that Kikuyu mythology had it that the mountain was the habitation of their God. While Eurocentric naming brought into being, supposedly, the Afrocentric naming identified being. The Luos, for example, would not name a child until one of their own dreamed and let them know which of the ancestors wanted to be named. Among the Kikuyu the sex of the child and position of birth automatically decided, and still usually does, the name of the child.

The point being made here is that just because Kenyans had not named their existence and relationship to their neighbours in writing, did not mean that they were unaware of it. It also means we should not seek the Kenya nation from language and literature alone but also from what Gay (1992) calls oral literature. An examination of the Kikuyu, Maasai, Luo, Kamba and other ethnic groups' folklore reveals an awareness of each other and the prejudices and stereotypes that they had in relation to each other. Although this thesis deals only with women's written literature, though a few of Ogot's narratives are actually based on oral stories, I am cognisant that literary works are just one way of reading culture, national consciousness as well as being Kenyan.

Suffice it to say, for now, that ethnicity should not be demonised as has been done in Kenya, where leaders have used it to initiate and fan what are referred to as ethnic or tribal clashes. Without ethnic nationalism/consciousness, there cannot be Kenyan or African nationalism. Afrocentric nationalism should be sought in the light of the awareness of the complexity of ethnic realities; which presuppose diversity of language, literature and culture. The first stop should therefore not be Africa or Kenya but the ethnic groups. We can therefore study literary works of individuals and how they relate to ethnic consciousness and see how that embraces Kenya, Africa and the world.

In the light of this argument, it is right and proper to conclude that a Kenyan woman writer is not only one who was born Kenyan but also one who expresses a Kenyan consciousness. This should not be mistaken as the need to be pro-Kenya, but it means that she must speak from within rather than from without. While the insider/outsider praxis may not always be easy to define, identification with one of the ethnic groups would be one of the easiest and direct marks. There will always be grey areas but all must somehow demonstrate that they feel part of the “we” that makes Kenya. To paraphrase Nnaemeka (1995) to be a Kenyan means not only birthright and geographical location but also genealogy and history. Our critical analysis of Macgoye’s fictions will reveal a practical example of how that can be done. The conclusion is that while the definition of Kenya must include a geopolitical construction, it should proceed to a consciousness level.

Chapter Two

Feminism and Afrocentricity

“To know and not act is not to know”
(Chinese proverb)

Feminism and Afrocentricity, two crucial terms in this thesis, are fluid concepts in meaning. In this chapter I attempt to disentangle the intricate web of theories, varieties and histories of the two ideologies in the hope of laying a firm foundation for the examination of specific Kenyan women writers. This chapter therefore has to answer two questions: “what is feminism?” and “what is Afrocentricity?” in a bid to explore the constraints and opportunities that these notions offer within a Kenyan and indeed African context. The chapter therefore endeavours to explore the points of contact as well as the points of departure between the two concepts. The first section of the chapter is an attempt to make sense out of the vast discourse on the meaning and history of feminism. The underlying assumption is that the word feminism is a European linguistic term representing a universal concept. In this regard I make every attempt to relate its manifestation in Europe to its parallel in Africa. In the second section of the chapter, an attempt is made to sieve the different discourses that have contested for the identification and definition of what is African and hence Afrocentric. Finally, the chapter examines the conflicts experienced by women who want to use both feminism and Afrocentricity as their chosen planes of ideological approach to self-representation and identity formation.

Defining feminism in contemporary times, in or outside Africa, is becoming a Herculean task. Every approach is bound to encounter a dissenting voice. Part of the problem is that there is no single person that can be seen to be the architect of the

concept, as some would cite Karl Marx for Marxism or Freud for psychoanalysis. Secondly, there are too many persons, engaged in theory as well as practice, and operating within a multitude of shades of approaches, who would like to be seen as feminists, for the theory to be captured, systematised and appropriated. The problem is compounded by the existence of other practitioners within the same shades of approaches who sometimes deny that what they are doing is feminist (Morris, 1993). To some, especially in the West, this plethora of differences is a virtue as it allows the different practitioners the chance to carve out spaces of their own (Whelehan, 1995). To others this is a grave weakness for a movement whose genesis was sisterhood, yet the sisters cannot even agree on whatever it is that unites them. bell hooks (1984, 17) has captured this scenario most succinctly when she says:

A central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definition(s) that could serve as points of unification. Without agreed upon definition(s), we lack a sound foundation on which to construct theory or engage in overall meaningful praxis.

In spite of the difficulties involved, Delmar (1986) believes that it is "...certainly possible to construct a base line definition of feminism and the feminist which can be shared by feminists and non-feminists"(8). According to her:

Many would agree that at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order. But beyond that, things immediately become more complicated (8).

She is quick to add, however, that "[g]eneral agreement about the situation in which women find themselves has not been accompanied by any shared understanding of why this state of affairs should exist or what can be done about it" (9). In the attempt to come to terms with the why and what of the experience of women globally, many women begin to experience serious differences which are reflected in what Delmar calls the

“naming of the parts” (9). She gives the examples of “...radical feminists, socialist feminists, Marxist feminists, lesbian separatists, women of colour...” (9) and then suggests that the list can continue. The pragmatism of her observations is attested to by an examination of the various other groupings that scholars have identified. Ruthven (1984) lists social feminists, psychofeminists, Marxist feminists, semio-feminists, lesbian feminists, black feminists and social-psycho-Marxist feminists. Dollan (1991) limits her list to liberal, cultural and materialist feminisms while Gyle (1990) includes radical, liberal, cultural and materialist feminism. Although Nye (1988) does not explicitly give a list of types of feminism, she implicitly suggests liberal, Marxist, existentialist, psychoanalytic and cultural feminisms as some of the main groupings. It is instructive to note that none of these scholars suggest they have a definitive list.

It is possible to argue that part of the problem lies in the history of the movement itself. In its 1960s and early '70s mode, (and we have remnants of this attitude even today), the movement operated, in the words of Delmar, at “high level[s] of generality” (10). It was assumed that women would find unity in the fact of their being women alone. This was the appeal to global sisterhood. In these circumstances, it became increasingly difficult to define feminism in liberal terms such as the ones used by bell hooks (1984): “a movement to end sexist oppression” (17) or as “a struggle to end sexist oppression” (24). Women were supposed to see themselves as “we” as opposed to the “other,” meaning men.

A second problem is occasioned by the historical mappings of the movement. Critics of feminism in Africa and other parts of the so-called third world countries argue that the movement is a racist occidental phenomenon, mainly addressing the needs of middle class white women in Europe and America. An examination of the history of feminism

reveals ways in which this criticism is both validated and contested. There is no doubt that the word was coined in response to happenings in definite Euro-American historical epochs. Etymologically, Rowbotham (1992) tells us that:

The word 'feminist' was invented by a French socialist, Charles Fourier, in the early nineteenth century. He imagined a 'new woman' who would transform society and be herself transformed by a society based on association and profit (8).

She says that the term appeared in Britain in the 1890s in reference to women campaigning for the vote and that by early twentieth century, the term "feminism was being used in the United States and Europe to describe a particular strand in the women's movement that stressed the uniqueness and difference of women rather than seeking equality. Then, difference was taken to imply women's superiority to men" and it was argued that "...to remake the world in women's image would be to improve society" (9). Delmar (1986) also acknowledges that it was in the course of the women's movement that the word feminist was coined.

There are interesting points to note here. The first one is that originally feminism was not to be seen as a monolithic attempt to transform society. The feminist would be transformed as well as transform society. Secondly, that the process was not one based on difference and opposition but that these are later developments in the philosophy. Although it described the acts and consciousness of women, it did not posit them in competition with men. Ray Strachey's (1928) historical account of the nature of the women's movement in Britain seems to bear out the truth of these observations. It records the support and the participation of men, key among them being John Stuart Mill, the philosopher, and Richard Pankhurst. One of the most lucid and articulate treatises on the women's cause is John Stuart Mill's (1992) "The subjection of women."

What becomes clear from a careful analysis of the discourse is that the word feminism came up in response to a historical and social occurrence. Ray Strachey's (1928) book mirrors, clearly, the historical and social consciousness that led to the rise of feminism. In many ways, in spite of apparent contradictions and conflicts, Western feminism becomes an ideology that can claim, in Delmar's words, its own history, practices and ideas. This possibility of systematisation has grown out of a long and arduous dialogical relationship between theory and practice that is yet to be re/produced in Africa.

Among those who reject inscriptions of feminism in Africa and her Diaspora is Hudson Clenora-Weems (1998). In her thinking, "...the historical realities and the agenda for the modern feminist movement... do not cohere with the historical realities and the agenda for the African(a) women's struggle for liberation" (151). She suggests that "...the true history of feminism, its origins and its participants, reveals its blatant racist background, thereby establishing its incompatibility with Africana women" (151). She traces the movement in America to 1870 when an amendment in the United State's constitution was effected to allow black men to vote. While conceding that women were justified in questioning their denial of suffrage, she finds it racist that when in 1890, the National American Woman Suffrage Association was formed it was dominated by white women. Clenora says that this association,

...asserted that the vote for women should be utilised by middle class white women, who could aid their husbands in preserving the virtues of the republic from the threat of unqualified and biological inferiors (Africana men), who, with the power of the vote, could gain a political foothold in the American system (152).

In essence they were arguing that since Africana men were "...members of an inferior race, they should not be granted the right to vote in advance of the female 'half' of the dominant group" (152). Her conclusion is that Africana women and white women

come from different segments of society and, thus, feminism as an ideology is not equally applicable to both.

In Britain, and this also largely applies to America, the feminist movement has almost always ultimately been traced to two issues: women's suffrage and the structure and strictures of home as an institution. The home, in England at least, seems to have constituted the ultimate pungent crystallisation of all the social prejudices against women. For generations, prior to the emergence of the women's rights movement in 1848 and its renaissance in the 1960s, middle class women were constructed as natural homemakers and mothers who were inherently disinclined to public life. They were seen as divinely and eternally destined for the domestic sphere while men were meant to rule supreme in the public domain. It seems to me that the much touted public/private opposition politics is feminism's attempt to deconstruct this worldview. It is the attempt to retrieve women from a world where they were inscribed as incapable of nothing more than frivolous prattle in their drawing rooms and who, therefore, could never be expected to articulate anything politically consequential. In other words feminism contested the predominantly male view that the women's world was supposed to be private all the time. One way to understand the now frequently quoted phrase "the personal is political", besides its relation to man/woman in husband/wife sexual relationships, is as feminism's attempt to ascribe significance to what women did in their drawing rooms, kitchens, bedrooms and other silencing and oppressive structures of the home. The home became an oppressive prison from which women had to break.

African women, on the other hand, seem to be suggesting that the conditions that gave and continue to give rise to their kind of feminism differ substantially from the western experience. Hudson-Weems (1998, 156) argues that African women are generally

agreed that feminism is an inappropriate term for two reasons: first that “the Africana woman does not see the man as her primary enemy as does the white feminist who is carrying out an age-old battle with her white male counterpart for subjugating her as his property”; and secondly because of “...Africana women’s apprehension and distrust of white organizations” (156). Clenora’s is not a denial of the presence or the need for the engagement in women’s liberation struggle for the Africana woman. She is not suggesting that the Africana women are not subjugated and treated as property by their male folk, but that the manner in which this is/was done in the two societies differ radically. African women may have, for example, been reduced to property by the dowry system but the home, as demonstrated by Kenyatta (1938) and attested to by many other women such as Ogot (1998), Kabira (1998) and others, was for them not silencing but empowering. Among the Kikuyu, for example, women were responsible for farm produce and could sell and do whatever they wanted with the produce without consulting their husbands. In an interview with me Ogot (1998) suggested that her marriage enabled her to vie for leadership in her husband’s constituency, which she won, and that that could never have happened had she been single. Marriage therefore, among the Luo, qualifies a woman for leadership positions. Clenora’s position is similar to that of Nnaemaeka (1997a) who argues that the reduction of women’s issues in Africa, as some feminist readings of African literature seem to do, into oppositional binaries such as male/female, agent/victim, traditional/modern, speech/silence and many others, is grossly simplistic and inconsistent with the reality on the ground.

Two examples from Strachey (1928) will suffice as prototypes of the kind of background that seems to validate the basis of Hudson-Weems’ argument: those of Caroline Norton and Florence Nightingale. Admittedly these women may not have been representative of the rank-and-file Euro-American women of the period but they were

symbolic of 19th century middle class patriarchy's construction of the ideal woman: the supposedly cultured and cultivated. It is more than likely that the rank and file women, obviously the majority, fared much worse. Florence Nightingale was born to a family of means in 1820 and grew up in consciousness of the confinement of the home. She wanted to become a nurse and engage in public life but her family, in consistency with social mores prevailing then, forbade it. She was limited to sitting in the drawing room and being read to or reading to her mother and father. This kind of life was so choking that she chose very strong words to describe it. These are her words as recorded by Strachey:

It is like lying on one's back, with one's hands tied and having liquid poured down one's throat. Worse than that, because a suffocation would immediately ensue and put a stop to this operation. But no suffocation would stop the other (398).

One of the most frustrating aspects of this view of the nature and position of women was that though society constructed women as inherently inclined to adhere to social rules and regulations, they nevertheless designed structures and means of coercing them to accept their lot. John Stuart Mill in his article entitled "The Subjection of Women" felt that men's brute strength over women had evolved into a culture that inscribed women as inferior and proceeded to subjugate them. His argument was that if anything was in the nature of women to do, then they did not need coercion to do it. They therefore need not be forced into marriage if they would of their own accord choose to marry. What comes out here is that marriage was not only an oppressive institution but also one into which women were compelled.

The second telling example is that of Caroline Norton's experience in 1836. Her case can be used to illustrate the position of women in England vis-à-vis the law. It is important also because her experience relates very well to the suffragist issue which

together with liberation from the confinement of home, was regarded as central to what has now come to be referred to as the first wave of feminism.

Caroline Norton married the Hon. Richard Norton at nineteen and at once became a darling of London. She brushed shoulders with the high and mighty of the day. Her marriage, however, was not a happy one. After many hardships, including beatings, the couple separated. Her husband took their three children and placed them under the care of his cousin, who then refused Caroline access to her children. According to Strachey (1928,35);

Caroline took refuge with her own family, and then found the dreadful position in which the law placed her. Not only was she penniless, and unable to keep any money if she earned it, but she had absolutely no rights in her children, and might never see them again until they were of age if Richard so decreed.

Later Caroline was to realise that not only could she not own property, but that she had also effectively become the property of her husband. In a trial in June 1836, in which her husband had sued a certain Lord Melbourne for “criminal conversation” (Strachey, 35) with her, she learnt that “being a married woman she could neither sue nor be sued, and could not be represented by counsel in the trial. Legally it was no affair of hers, for legally, she could have no affairs, if she was a virtuous and a married woman” (35). In other words, a married woman was either a non-person or the property of her husband. This view of women is, surely, one of the reasons why the active/passive dichotomy is at the centre of the western feminist discourse. The women’s struggle for the vote was, as it appears to me, also a fight to be regarded as citizens and hence given agency in the determination of their nation’s destiny. However, in many African societies, there would have been no way of imposing such legal restrictions as Norton imposed on Caroline. Voting has never been an issue for African women because it was a system imposed by colonialism and by the time it came into force, women were recognised as

voting citizens. Most traditional systems, though male dominated, also provided for women's voices to be heard. This, however, does not mean that African women are united about the nature, history and object of feminism in Africa.

The anthology in which Clenora's article is published contains essays by African women theorising on feminism from a multiplicity of positions. They are struggling not only with its definition but also its history. Unlike many others in the anthology, Aina (1998) seems to suggest that western feminism is the norm and African feminism is only an emerging phenomenon. In her own words, "in most African nations, the modern vision of feminism is still at its infancy, and remains a mere academic exercise (85)". Unlike in the west, where feminism began as a political movement before moving to the academy, in Africa it is the reverse. "Feminist consciousness has been left to a few elite women who are mostly in academia." According to her, "[t]he precolonial period recorded no major feminist attacks on African traditional social structure, and not until the colonial era did we have recorded cases of women acting as pressure groups to reject many of colonial economic and political policies" (70). The major problem with the African feminist, for her, is not naming but gaining grass roots support.

There are other women like Ama Ata Aidoo (1998) who maintain "...that African women were feminists long before feminism" (47), and who consider being feminist as imperative for men and women who believe that "Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives, and the burden of African development". In essence the "crucial element" in this kind of feminism is the conviction that African women must have "the best that the environment can offer" (47). Sofola's (1998) approach is differently structured. She argues that European and Arab invasion began a process of what she calls the "de-womanization of the African womanhood (52)". Her

argument is that male dominated European and Arab systems of power dislodged African men from their positions of power and they reacted by taking the little power that their women used to have. The result is "...the contemporary African women who are to a large extent disoriented, weakened, and rendered ineffective and irrelevant" (52).

Sofola's argument in this volume is that by and large the African philosophy of life provided for the empowering of women and that this system was disrupted by the introduction of Euro-Christian and Arab-Muslim systems of thought. In an attempt to provide an authentic African gender mapping, she says that in the "African cosmology, the psyche is the god-man in the individual which connects the creature to the centre of the creative energy. It is known as the spirit of life, *mo Ndu* among the Igbo, and *Emi* among the Yoruba. It is the aspect of man that contains in essence all that the created person is and will become on earth" (52). This spirit of life is without gender and makes all human beings equal in essence. By paying attention to language, she suggests that the idea of woman as an appendage originates from a western cosmological and linguistic world. It is the West that introduced the idea of woman having been created as God's afterthought. It is English, a Western language, that posits women as appendages to men reflected in such words as *fe male*, *wo man*, and *hu man*. She contrasts that with *nwa* as the root word among the Igbo to name children. The male child becomes *nwa-oke* while the female becomes *nwa-nyie*. To refer to both generically, the Igbo will say *madu* while the Yoruba will say *enia*. This linguistic analysis does seem to coincide with Kiswahili in East Africa. Man is *mwana-ume* while woman is *mwana-mke*, girl *m-sichana* and boy is *m-vulana* while man in a generic sense is *mtu*. Semantically, these languages have root words independent of the sexes when referring to men and women as a single entity. *Mwanaume* and *Mwanamke* in Kiswahili translate as male person and

female person respectively. Linguistically, in these African communities at least, it becomes rather difficult to see woman as an appendage to man.

Sofola argues that the process of de-womanization in Africa was begun by the destruction and complete elimination of female lines of authority and socio-political power and replacing them with European/Arabian male centred systems of authority and governance. This was followed by the reduction of the four realities of African womanhood: “her reality as a woman; her equal of a man in essence; her reality as daughter; and her reality as a mother” (61). Interestingly, Sofola suggests that the greatest victim of this development was not the rural woman but “...particularly those whose psyche has been severely damaged in the process of acquiring Western education with its philosophy of gender bias” (62). She cites the institution of polygamy as one the institutions that the western educated woman has been socialised by the education system to hate. “With her Eurocentric notions of marriage the educated African woman clings to her husband and runs into an emotional fury whenever her husband gives her a scare by invoking the possibility of polygamy” (62). The reason is that she fails to see that the more a man is shared between wives the less central he becomes to the women involved.

These three women represent three views that are equally problematic. Aina would like us to believe that feminism, a positive phenomenon, is in her view occidental in origin and that it is this western ideal that Africans should emulate or aspire to attain. Ama Ata Aidoo’s position, however, suggests that African and western feminisms are complementary or parallel systems. Her argument that Africans were feminists long before feminism reads feminism into the activities and views of women and men and not necessarily to the name they ascribe(d) to their choices. Sofola offers no alternatives

but implicit in her article is the suggestion of retrieving and centring African ways of constructing womanhood. Sofola not only suggests that the colonial legacy is largely responsible for much of the sexism in Africa but is also sceptical of feminism, as constructed in the west, as a tool of liberation, arguing that it would only enlist Africans in Eurocentric wars while denigrating African institutional systems such as polygamy.

In Africa, as in the West, the definition of feminism is hardly resolved. What makes the debate in Africa different, however, is the centrality of the question of the movement's authenticity as a way of dealing with Africa's specific gender problems. This debate revolves around whether or not feminism is an imported philosophy or is indigenous to Africa. Those who argue that it is indigenous are thinking of the existence, prior to colonialism, of assertive women leaders, warriors and women who were eloquent against the oppression of their sex and hence critical of existing patriarchal social structures.

Similarly, it is within the same considerations that we should understand Delmar's (1986) statement that "[w]hen Ray Strachey wrote her history the close connection between feminism and the social movement for change in women's position was redolent with meaning... (14)". We should understand it within the context of the economic and material conditions prevailing in England, specifically, at that time, and Europe and America in general. It is perhaps this close connection that makes many conflate feminism and the women's movement. However, some western theorists argue that a woman who subscribed or subscribes to the ideals of the women's movement should not necessarily be inscribed as a feminist. Consequently, although both Florence Nightingale and Caroline Norton protested their treatment as second class citizens, neither of them, as Delmar says, (she takes her cue from Ray Strachey) would qualify

as a feminist. In Delmar's words, "Stratchey takes Norton at her word and accepts her disavowal of feminism" (16). Nightingale on the other hand is said to have "...put her own work first..." as opposed to "...women's rights..." and therefore cannot qualify as a feminist. In essence then, we are being called to make what she calls a "...a relative objective differentiation between feminists and non-feminists by defining feminism as "...a conscious political choice" and a feminist "...as someone whose central concern and preoccupation lies with the position of women and their struggle for emancipation..." (16).

This is an exclusionist definition. It is a very specialised one and would seem to locate many persons concerned with women's issues on the margins of feminism. At the same time it raises fundamental issues that must be dealt with before inscribing anybody as a feminist. First, it obviously means that it is next to impossible for a man to be a feminist. It is perhaps only a self-effacing man who would consciously make the position of women his central concern and preoccupation. Many women outside Europe and America would hardly fit in this definition. The definition does, however, reflect a generally accepted progress in feminism as a historical movement. In the 1890s and perhaps earlier, when the struggle was liberal in nature, men were welcome in the movement as long as they regarded women as their equals, deserving of all the rights and privileges accruing to any human being. In the 1960s when the focus shifted to sexual politics, men became suspect since women were constituted as sexually oppressed and exploited while men were constructed as the oppressors and exploiters. In Delmar's (1986) words, "...in the mid-eighties it [was] impossible to speak of male feminism (26)."

Feminism in the context of “conscious choice” and “central concern and preoccupation” becomes a philosophy by, about, and for women. There are obvious tensions in such kind of a scenario. Delmar feels that this “can produce a circular self confirming rhetoric and a hermetic closure of thought” (27). It is inescapable that feminism must deal with male/female opposition. This makes it difficult to keep it within the confines of either one of the sexes. Keeping it within the domains of women alone would also make winning the feminist cause nearly impossible unless one were to embrace lesbian/separatist/cultural feminism. Even then, women’s constructions of the self must of necessity be accompanied by an understanding of the constructions of the other (men). Without knowledge of the nature and location of danger, an attempt to escape the danger might land one right in it. In essence this means that even lesbian/separatist/cultural feminists must understand men in order to avoid them and or effectively engage them in opposition politics. While their feminism may be able to operate as a philosophy solely *by* women, it cannot be exclusively *about* women.

The alternative is to construct a more embracing definition of feminism. One such definition is offered by bell hooks (1984) as a movement against sexist oppression. By implication, a feminist is a person who believes in the eradication of sexist oppression. Simone de Beauvoir, quoted by Delmar (1986, 27) defined feminists as “...those women or men who fight to change the position of women in liaison with yet outside the class struggle without totally subordinating that change to a change in society”. African women have also suggested such definitions. Nnaemeka (1997a, 22) implicitly defines feminism “...as a pedagogy for social change...”. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) defines it as a movement for social transformation that includes women. It is from this definition that she coins the acronym *stivanism* as an alternative for African women who find the term feminism unacceptable.

Broad definitions may have the advantage of invoking less antagonism than narrow and precise ones, but they sometimes fall short of making any distinctions. They, for example, do not tell us what to do with those women and men who subscribe to the idea of social transformation that involves women and yet disavow feminism. They tend to lead to the inscription as feminist women who, like Hannah More, were, to use Delmar's (1986) words "rabid anti-feminists" (15). Hannah More and her sisters had simply started Sunday school and cottage visiting sessions. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries the fact that they were teaching "...anything at all was a highly revolutionary matter" for middle class women (Strachey 1928, 13). Although Hannah More's activities helped middle class women see beyond their drawing rooms and question what Strachey calls their own "ornamental futility" (14), she never regarded herself as a harbinger of the women's movement let alone a feminist. Additionally, the inclusive/exclusive definitions become especially hard to sustain because there are theorists and practitioners whose engagements fit the definitions but who neither embrace nor disavow feminism. This takes us back to the problem of whether one is a feminist because of what s/he does or because s/he says s/he is, and whether one approach would necessarily negate the other.

I would like to suggest, like Morris (1993), that feminism is an ideology that operates at two levels. She says that "[i]deology can refer to a consciously held system of beliefs which people knowingly choose or reject such as competitive individualism, communism or Christianity (4)" At a second level she says, "ideology is used to refer to the way we perceive reality" (4). At this level:

Ideology rests on the assumption that as we enter the cultural life of our society - as we acquire language and interact with others, we absorb and assume its ways of seeing. We are drawn imperceptibly into a complex network of values,

assumptions and expectations which are always already there prior to us and so seem natural, just the way things are (4-5).

Her suggestion is that feminism is of the first type but that a great deal of it is concerned with the second type of ideology. My suggestion is that feminism can be located in the two types of ideologies. The product of consciousness raising groups becomes a feminist operating in the first order of ideology. Women's attempt to meet their own practical needs of day-to-day living and to engage and negotiate their own spaces in a male dominated world produces a feminist in the second order of ideology. A good example of such a product is the friend of my mother mentioned in chapter one who argued that she would pay men and women the same since she was not hiring penises but labour. This may seem contradictory in the sense that feminism is revolutionary rather than conformist and that therefore women who are meeting day-to-day needs within the limitations of patriarchy are more likely to be conformist than feminist. However, it is my contention that the creative nature of humanity allows no community to remain static forever. History has also proved that wherever there has been oppression of one kind or the other, there have also been instances of insurrection. Racism, nazism, slavery, dictatorships and, for our purposes here, sexism, across the world have not gone without resistance. Such resistance is born out of people's attempts to meet their own daily demands in their own specific environments. Although largely undocumented, women in many societies have risen against sexism without ever having heard of feminism. In an interview with Wanjiku Kabira, a leading Kenyan gender activist, I learnt of "...Field Marshal Muthoni, who went and bought goats and took them to her father-in-law and bought ...her freedom at the age of 60". She felt that dowry had reduced her to the status of property and given her husband undue claims over her. It is in this kind of context that we should read Nnaemeka's (1997b, 165) assertion that the "feminist spirit and ideals are indigenous to the African environment"

and that “[we] do not need to look far into the annals of African history to see the inscriptions of feminist engagements”. The histories of communities all over the world show diverse points of insurrection in their progress in time against oppressive structures including sexism. The ultimate value of this approach is the assertion that it is possible for someone to fight against sexism without necessarily subscribing to the ideology that women, globally, constitute a class of people defined by sex and targeted on that basis only for discrimination, exploitation and marginalization. This does not question whether or not women constitute a class treated unjustly only on the basis of its sex, but it does suggest that one need not be cognisant of that global class to be engaged in the war against sexism. I am also suggesting that just because a woman is not aware of the global nature of the problem does not make her less of a feminist.

Later in this chapter I attempt to make a distinction between being African and having an African consciousness. It seems to me that the same mechanics would apply here in making distinctions between being feminist and having a feminist consciousness. One can display a feminist consciousness without necessarily being a feminist. At the same time, one can be a feminist without necessarily being able to articulate that consciousness or, to make it a little clearer, without necessarily having had to make a conscious choice about whether or not one is a feminist. Finally it must be admitted that it is possible for one to be a feminist and possess a feminist consciousness at the same time. I would suggest that feminists in academia and most activists, most of whom are Euro-Americans and a few elite western-trained women from the rest of the world, fall into this last mode of construction.

This is the class of people that Delmar had in mind when she says that:

The feminists are the leaders, organisers, publicists, lobbyists, of the women’s movement; they come into their own and into existence on a relatively large

scale in the course of development of a women's movement. The social movement, particularly in its political dimension provides the context for feminism; feminists are its animating spirits (16).

These are the people whose ideological inclinations lead to what she calls "the naming of the parts", by which she means the tendency of feminists to identify themselves in relation to dominant ideologies that they subscribe to. Amongst such namings, I propose to discuss liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, cultural feminism and psycho-feminism here because they seem to constitute the main frameworks out of which other versions flow. The term black or African feminism is avoided here because it is usually interpreted in opposition to European/American feminism. I prefer the terms Eurocentric and Afrocentric respectively, which then allows Africans or Europeans to freely subscribe to or re/interpret the strands discussed here. Liberalism, Marxism or any other of the "isms" can be engaged with from an Afrocentric or Eurocentric perspective.

Nye (1988) says that "[w]hen a woman in the United States or Western Europe first identifies herself as a feminist, it is often as a liberal feminist, asserting her claim to the equal rights and freedoms guaranteed to each individual in democratic society (5)". This is in keeping with "nineteenth century feminists who found in democratic ideals of equality and liberty...a coherent systematic body of doctrine from which to argue for women's rights". Dolan (1991) suggests that liberal feminism relies on values claimed to be universally human to set its goal as social, political and economic parity with men. By changing the cultural perception of women as second class citizens, liberal feminism's aim is to modify rather than overthrow or transform the dominant system. In Europe and America as demonstrated by Dolan (1991), Nye (1988), and Gayle (1990) liberal feminism's key rallying calls have been the vote, equal pay for equal work,

women's right to control their bodies including freedom to choose abortion, child care and affirmative action.

In many ways, contemporary African feminism seems to lean more heavily toward liberal feminism than any other kind of feminism. Kabira (1998) argues that feminism is just humanism only that women are not considered human in humanism. Feminism, then is a philosophy that corrects that error by insisting on the equal human worth of women. Consistently, many African feminists stress that theirs is not a movement exclusive of, or in opposition to men, but one in co-operation with them. Grace Ogot argues that man is a friend of woman and that some women oppress their husbands. Her insistence is that the key thing is equal opportunity for men and women alike. Nnaemeka's choice of an alternative term to feminism, nego-feminism is also suggestive of liberalism where women negotiate for their place in prevailing social systems.

Critics of liberal feminism argue that liberal feminists' desire to become part of the universal that has historically excluded them forces some of them to "acquiesce to their erasure as women" (Dolan 1991, 5) in their pursuit of parity with men. Dolan also suggests that as the women gain presence in the male dominated system "an insidious backsliding sometimes occurs with regard to feminist politics (4)", as the women are sucked and enlisted into the dominant system's agenda. bell hooks raises a more problematic issue. Equality with men cannot be a viable goal since all men are not equal. The matter is made worse due to the fact that many of the patriarchs of liberalism such as Rousseau, John Locke, David Hume, Jeremy Bentham and others do not have impeccable records as far as women's total equality with men is concerned.

Given the shortcomings of liberalism, one can understand why those critical of the ideology would find Marxism appealing. Liberalism advocates reform while Marxism calls for a transformation or a revolution in society. While liberalism focuses on the law, Marxism focuses on economics. The argument in Marxism is that the oppression of women is rooted in the historical and material conditions of society. It would therefore make little sense to provide equality within the law while social institutions such as marriage remain inherently sexist. Under Marxism and with the attainment of socialism, where private property would disappear and childcare would become the responsibility of the State, women would, ideally, find freedom and equality. In contemporary times most women critical of classical Marxism's ability to address women's issues prefer the term materialist feminism. They argue that "Marxism cannot adequately address women's exploitation and oppression unless the marxist problematic itself is transformed so as to be able to account for the sexual division of labour" (Hennessy 1993, xi-xii).

Dolan (1991) says that "[m]aterialist feminism deconstructs the mythic subject woman to look at women as a class oppressed by material conditions and social relations" (10). Delineating the characteristics of material feminism, Gayle says it minimises biological differences between men and women; stresses material conditions of production such as history, race, class and gender; and emphasises the group rather than the individual. According to Dolan, what sets materialist feminism apart from Marxism is that it focuses on material conditions of gender rather than privileging economic determinism. She says that "[i]n materialist discourse, gender is not innate. Rather it is dictated through enculturation, as gender divisions are placed at the service of the dominant culture's ideology" (10). One of the goals of materialist feminism therefore is to

“...denaturalise the dominant ideology that demands and maintains such oppressive social arrangements” (10).

Although Dolan says that materialist feminism “views women as historical subjects whose relation to prevailing structures is also influenced by race, class and sexual identification”, the differential positioning of women vis-à-vis power in different structures of society still remains problematic. If black African women, in the continent or the Diaspora, are set aside for discrimination in favour of white women purely on the basis of colour, how could they find solidarity in the collectivism of materialist feminism? If de-emphasising difference is central to materialist feminism, why not struggle for human emancipation with gender as one of the bases of discrimination that needs jettisoning? This would perhaps mean that appending feminism to materialism would be some kind of a misnomer.

It seems to me that that is what Nnaemeka (1998) has in mind when she questions the idea of class, race and sexual orientation as significant paradigms of addressing feminist issues in Africa. She argues that “[t]o go to a remote village in Africa and round up a group of women who have no clean water to drink, no food to eat and have never seen a different race of humans and theorize/preach to them the feminist framework of intersection of race, class, etc., is nothing but feminism in futility” (7). What Nnaemeka is contesting is not the validity of the concepts but their deriving from specific Europe-centric material conditions and being arbitrary applied to the African situation. In her own words, “...African women see and address such issues first as they configure in and relate to their *own lives and immediate surroundings*” (7) [emphasis in original text].

While liberal and materialist feminisms attempt to collapse sexual difference, cultural feminism embraces and valorises it. Quoting Alison Jagar, Dolan (1991) says that, “cultural feminists elide the difference between sex and gender” (7). While cultural and radical feminisms are sometimes conflated, they differ in that cultural feminism reifies sexual difference based on absolute gender categories. On the other hand, radical feminism calls for the elimination of gender as a defining category between men and women. According to Dolan, cultural feminism holds that women are more natural than men because of their being closely related to life cycles mirrored in nature; are pacifistic due to their being nurturers as opposed to being violent and aggressive; and that they possess a spirituality that has been consumed in men by their (men’s) all-encompassing drive to conquer and claim. The most problematic part of this approach is the obvious biological essentialism as the women’s culture is posited as being founded on nothing but biology. It also falls into the trap of universalising women’s experiences across race, culture and class. Like negritude it plays into the hands of its enemies by embracing negative concepts ascribed to women and used as the basis for discrimination and trying to valorise them. Biological determinism also makes gender war difficult to sustain because in the words of Morris (1993), “what is inborn must be borne since it cannot be changed” (94). Kabira’s (1998) argument provides an interesting rendition or application of cultural feminists’ ideas in an African context. While many African women would argue against the separatism inherent in cultural feminism, Kabira argues that women in Kenya should get a larger share of the country’s scarce resources as their specific socialisation makes them better managers of the resources to the benefit of all in society. In effect she embraces, affirms and valorises difference without ascribing it to biology. This obviously becomes problematic if we are, at the same time, to argue for the disruption of that same socialisation that makes

women more useful to society. The approach would also not free women from the constraints of oppressive traditional and patriarchal stereotyping.

Feminists who find it hard to explain women's universally inferior positioning using social theories such as liberalism and Marxism have the option of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, for women, is liberating as well as debilitating. Some women like Kate Millet (1969) accuse Freud, the architect of psychoanalysis, of formulating a theory designed to affirm and sustain masculine dominance and feminine subservience. Others such as Morris (1993) suggest that Freud's usefulness lies in his demonstration that masculinity and femininity are not genetically ingrained but socially constructed. They are therefore not immutable but malleable. While social theories suggest that women's oppression is sustained through social structures constructed by man, psychoanalysis suggests that the oppression is not only sustained by structures outside individuals but also those within them. The sanctioning of women's oppression is imprinted in the psyche of the people: both men and women. It is for this reason that women's oppression continues in all forms of society: feudal, capitalist or socialist.

Freud's greatest affront to women is his suggestion that children resolve their Oedipus complex when they become aware of castration. The boy realises that girls are already castrated, they do not have a penis, and fearing that his father will castrate him for having an incestuous relationship with his mother, decides to abandon the mother and make peace with the father. The girl on the other hand, upon realising that she is already castrated, blames her mother for it and therefore abandons her mother for the father in the hope that he will compensate her lack with a baby. The end result is the valorisation of the penis and the idealisation of man as an institution of power. This reading of infant

development particularly irks some feminists because it reads female genitalia as a lack or absence while privileging male genitalia as a presence.

There are two reactions to Freud that Morris (1993) suggests endear his psychoanalysis to feminism. The first is to react to him like Mitchell (1974) and suggest that Freud's was not a prescription for patriarchy but an analysis of the same. The second is to read him using Lacan. Lacan shifts Freud from an overemphasis on sexuality to language. Lacan argued that language is necessitated by our need to represent absence. The child enters the linguistic world as a result of its being forced by phallic authority to sever its incestuous relationship with the mother. The child loses contact with such things as the breasts, which it needed and had access to and therefore did not need to name. Phallic authority is rooted in what Freud had called the fear of castration and hence is inevitably connected to the idea of possessing or not possessing a penis. The phallus therefore becomes a symbolic representation of women's lack. Language, being a system of signs and symbols, is therefore largely a masculine way of ordering the world. Psychofeminism is not so much about embracing either Lacan's or Freud's ideas but about making their ideas a springboard to theorising women's position in society. Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva and other feminist theorists have made use of psychoanalysis to develop their own strong delineation of women's condition.

While psychoanalysis in reference to man/woman relationship should obviously apply to Africa, it assumes an interesting dimension when applied to the Africa/West relationship. First the Africa/West relationship is in many ways analogous to a woman/man relationship respectively. This dates back to colonialism when colonial literature, such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, figuratively represented Africa as a woman and used such sexist diction as conquest and penetration where Europe assumed

the position of man. Secondly, there is the problem of the first colonial and post-colonial generation of African writers who represented Africa as mother and who, while trying to valorise Africa, never saw women as anything beyond mothers. Thirdly, there is, in Lacan's view, the issue of language and the way men use it as an instrument of power against women. Reading African women's reaction to western feminists, it is clear that many of them find western feminists patronising and imposing in their diction to/about African women. In other words western feminists are behaving in the same way that men do to women. It seems, in my opinion, that African women are suggesting that the language of western feminism is Eurocentric and, in terms of its relation to Africa, phallogocentric. Finally, it would be interesting to investigate the inscription of African women, in western literature, as metaphors of what Europe used to be in terms of male oppression and domination. There is a case to be made for contemporary Eurocentric feminists who treat African/Afrocentric women as evocative of European women's oppressed past and therefore necessarily lower in rank as far as gender freedom is concerned, very much like Conrad and his interpretation of Africa as evocative of Europe's primitive past. Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* suggests that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Africa's metaphysical darkness was similar to Europe's darkness in primordial times. In the same way, there are some Eurocentric women who interpret Africa's contemporary gender issues as a replication of what Europe went through more than a century ago. The result is an evolutionary gradation of gender politics in terms of development, with Europe at the apex and Africa at the bottom in the same way that social Darwinism interpreted human development in the nineteenth century. This, I think, is one of the things that Alice Walker does in *Possessing the Secrets of Joy* as chapter six of this thesis seeks to demonstrate.

What emerges from all these analyses is that feminism today is a movement in crisis. At the same time, it appears that the crisis is much more likely to have negative effects, for the movement, outside Europe and America than in the two continents. The reason being that mainline feminism has hardly taken off the ground in those areas and the absence of the false unity that gave the movement initial boosts in Europe and America may be a deterrent to women, and indeed to men, who would have otherwise been sympathetic to its ideals. It means that women outside Europe and America are launching into feminism without any clarity about how they should situate themselves. They begin with a crisis of being. Feminism and Afrocentricity, as consciousness movements, both raise issues of identity/self-cognition. Women of Africa, and other third world countries, are called upon to situate themselves between two philosophies, both of which have been, at various times, oppressive to them. If they identify themselves as part of a global sisterhood, they risk becoming victims of racism. If they turn to their race for identity they risk sexist oppression. For them, therefore, the discourse of being feminist cannot be divorced from the discourse of being African. It is for that reason that I now turn to the question of what it means to be African and/or Afrocentric.

In this thesis Afrocentricity shall be understood as a way of knowledge formation and/or understanding the world whose foundation or central springboard is Africa. Its genesis, at a very basic level, shall be assumed to be derived by combining Africa and the word centre hence suggesting the centrality of Africa in knowledge formation. The theme of "moving the centre" as espoused by Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993) is paramount to the conception of this ideology. The ideology is rooted in the Africans' "...struggle for the right to name the world for ourselves" (3). At the same time, the ideology equally recognises the right of other communities to name the world for themselves.

Afrocentricity in this case is therefore not a counter-discourse to Eurocentricity but a parallel one. To paraphrase Ngugi wa Thiong'o "[t]he basic question [is]: from what base [do] African people look at their world? Eurocentrism or Afrocentrism? The question [is] not that of mutual exclusion between Africa and Europe but the basis and the starting point of their interaction" (8). The call here is for a shift from the tendency to construct knowledge of the world as if the West were the only centre, to the recognition of the existence of a multiplicity of centres in what Ngugi calls "a multiplicity of spheres in all the cultures of the world" (xvi). Taken in this context, my conception of Afrocentricity borrows from and rises above previous movements/ideologies that have sought to deal with the African position vis-à-vis the rest of the world, and primarily the white world. Pan-africanism, black consciousness, negritude, consciencism, and Afrocentricity, as espoused by Molefi Asante Kete, all have their contributions to make, but each of them has severe limitations which necessitates a redefinition or reconstruction of what it means to see reality from the perspective of an African in contemporary terms.

The pitfalls of Pan-Africanism have been well articulated by Antony Kwameh Appiah (1992). First, the movement traces its origins to African Americans who, having been uprooted from different African environments, found unity in race rather than specific African ethnic groups. This meant that its adherents became proponents of both racialism and racism as explicated by Appiah. They believed that their being members of the black race gave them sufficient grounds for unity and necessarily meant that they were differently and essentially endowed with different cognitive and or moral dispositions. The African Americans, such as Alexander Crummell, also proceeded from the false premise, perhaps now more plain than then, of the metaphysical unity of Africa.

It was upon this false premise that the pioneer continental Pan-Africanists such as Kwameh Nkrumah tried to establish a United States of Africa. Julius Nyerere, also a pioneer Pan-Africanist, was soon to realise that different nation states as invented by colonialism would be pursuing different nationalist agenda from continental ones. This realisation made him assert that “[t]o talk of unity as if it would be a panacea of all ills [was] to walk naked into a den of lions” (Nyerere 1968, 272). In order to formulate a new kind of Afrocentricity one must consider Appiah’s (1992) assertion that, “[t]he reason that Africa cannot take an African cultural or political or intellectual life for granted is that there is no such thing: there are only so many traditions with their complex relationships and, as often, their lack of any relationship to each other” (80).

Nkurumah’s consciencism, with its suggestions of the need to find a synthesis between African traditions, Euro-Christian traditions and Arab-Muslim traditions, may be a shade more sophisticated than the earlier Pan-African ideal but it is also problematic. Hountondji (1983) has provided a critical evaluation of Nkurumah’s philosophy in an attempt to chart Nkurumah’s development in his writings. In spite of the revisions to the ideology/philosophy that Nkurumah made, Hountondji says that consciencism still “remains dependent upon many pre-1965 ideological assumptions. It still “neglects the pluralism of pre-colonial African culture, forcing an artificial unity upon what is really irreducibly diverse...” (148). Nkurumah also tends to simplify both the Euro-Christian tradition as well as the Arab-Muslim one by treating them as unitary, self-contained systems. When he suggests the need to find a synthesis in order to cure the African crises of being occasioned, which has been occasioned by the three competing discourses, he is still essentially subscribing to the ideal of a metaphysical unity. In other words, to use Hountondji’s (1983) words Nkurumah still thinks that cultural

pluralism is the “arch-enemy” (149). This is unacceptable because cultural diversity is now recognised as inescapable and inevitable. Contemporary Afrocentricity, to be effective, must embrace and encourage cultural pluralism. Indeed without cultural pluralism it is impossible to construct Afrocentricity as an ideology.

If we cannot embrace Pan-Africanism and consciencism as defining parameters for Afrocentricity, negritude and black consciousness are much more problematic. Black consciousness has been used loosely in African American literature to denote the need to factor the African American experience in knowledge construction. The term is given much more specific meaning in Steve Biko’s writings. He defines black consciousness as “...in essence the realisation by the black man of the need to rally together with his brothers around the cause of their operation - the blackness of their skin - and to operate as a group in order to rid themselves of the shackles that bind them to perpetual servitude” (1978, 49). While recognising the value of this kind of approach, especially in regard to Biko’s South Africa, contemporary Afrocentricity must also be cognisant of black men whose experience differs from that of the black South African. In Biko’s black consciousness, although colour is not the defining factor, in the sense that Biko argues that some black South Africans are incapable of black consciousness as an ideology, it is nonetheless primary to the consciousness because Biko makes no room for whites to exhibit black consciousness. As will become clear in the course of this thesis, the kind of Afrocentricity that I am suggesting has very little to do with colour. My suggestion is that whether one is Eurocentric or Afrocentric depends on socialisation rather than colour. In most cases, colour determines the socialisation that one receives because it largely determines or is determined by the environment in which one is born, but this is by no means inevitable. We are not born European or African but we become either of these depending on the kind of enculturation that we receive. I am in agreement with Wiredu (1996) when he says that

...we are not born with a mind, not even one that is *tabula rasa*; we are only born with the potential of a mind (in the form of a nervous system). This potential is progressively actualised in a certain way through the barrage of sensory stimulation emanating from purely physical (i.e. non-social) environment; *but the person making attribute of mentality is not attainable without another kind of barrage, namely the cultural or socialising barrage of sensory stimulation from kith and kin and kindred*" (21) [emphasis mine].

This means that a person of any colour has the potential to become either European or African. To assume that there are no Eurocentric Africans would be to undermine the success of colonialism so ably demonstrated by Fanon (1967, 1965). To deny whites the capacity to be Afrocentric and/or African would be racist at the very least, and to subscribe to the falsehood that Afrocentricity is some essence only available to black Africans. We would be falling victim to racialism, as explicated by Appiah (1992), meaning the supposition that knowledge and/or culture is essentially race specific.

In many respects this was the error of negritude, the French black world's response to colonialism. In a broad and general sense, according to Irele, (1981), the term negritude has come "... to denote the black world in its historical being, in opposition to the west, and in this way resumes the total consciousness of belonging to the black race as well as an awareness of the objective historical and sociological implications of the fact" (65). Like Pan-Africanism and black consciousness, negritude's foundation is race. Negritude is, however, even more problematic, especially in its senhorian sense where black/white opposition is shown to influence the two races' cognitive capacities and functions. Senhor's inscription of the African sensibility as primarily emotional in opposition to the European rational disposition has been shown to be inherently flawed and inadequate as a measure for Afrocentricity.

It is at this point that I must return to my proposition that Afrocentricity, like feminism, has to be seen as operational within two realms: *being* and *consciousness*. This is not

an aspect that is special to either feminism or Afrocentricity, but a universal possibility for any human identity. Understanding the two terms, being and consciousness, should be helpful in contrasting being African and African consciousness. The word consciousness here is not to be understood in its simple meaning in psychology as awareness. It is not to be understood as in opposition to being dead or insensitive to one's environment. It is to be understood as a state of the mind arrived at as a result of a deliberate and active mental process. Consciousness at this level cannot be arrived at without regard to others. It is not about knowing but about knowing that one knows. It is related to being African in the sense that being African, as a mode of existence, to use Sartre's (1993) words, becomes the object of knowledge. African consciousness is the knowledge yielded by investigation of the phenomenon of being African. As can be clearly seen, this is not the preserve of Africans. Other scholars can investigate and accurately locate the meaning of being African without becoming African. They can articulate an African consciousness without subscribing to or having their lives dictated by that consciousness. Consciousness in this respect is just knowledge of knowledge. This is my understanding of Sartre's argument that consciousness is positional and that all consciousness is consciousness of something. For you to be conscious (have knowledge) of something, you do not have to be that something. That is why some people can pretend to be Christians for purposes of gaining employment in organisations that only employ Christians. They articulate what it means to be Christian without being Christian. The implication of the distinctions between being and consciousness, for this study, is that I do not merely examine statements made in reference to being feminist or African but also look at characters' spontaneous responses to different situations and challenges.

In this context and in contrast to African or feminist consciousness, being African or feminist should be understood in the context of Sartre's theory of being in which he argues that being is independent of the knowledge we have of it. Referring to the being of phenomena in general, he defines being as the existent. The existent's being is not dependent on the perception we have of it. The existent simply exists. In his words, "[b]eing is. Being is in itself. Being is what it is" (1993, xlii). Being is not limited to its parts of which we have cognition. Using the analogy of a table as an object he says, "The object does not possess being and its existence is not a participation in being nor any other kind of relation. It is. That is the only way to define its manner of being; the object does not hide being..."(xxv). We are of course referring here to the much more complex concept of being African and African consciousness. It ought, therefore, to be said that being African in this case is rooted in the cultures of African peoples. An African is identifiable by his/her ability to understand, empathise and display a certain measure of spontaneity in his/her reaction, as an insider, to cultural stimuli from at least basic African cultural community. In this context, Africa, the continent as invented by colonialism, is important since it forms the basis of discussion. It defines the physical region inhabited by the cultural communities being examined. However, there is a way in which the word Africa was only coined to put together already existing groups of people. In other words, colonialism invented the linguistic item "Africa" to describe an already existing phenomenon in terms of people and land. It is this existence, independent of name, and first and foremost in reference to people in their cultures, that I am calling *being* African. To put it plainly, Africans existed prior to the term/concept Africa. It would not, therefore, be imprudent to posit that being African is neither the product of the European gaze nor a counterfoil to European identity. This is because, as Sartre (1993) would argue, being precedes consciousness. Africa was an entity, in spite of its amorphous cultural constitution, before it was given a name and before scholars

began to inquire into its manner of being. A good beginning point in this discourse is Soyinka's assertion that:

[t]he African world did not come into existence in reaction to any other world. But sometimes, when all other arguments and expositions have failed --- failed that is, not intrinsically, not from lack of merit, but as a result of what we have described as the illogical imposition of external references --- then we must resort to allied methodologies and define the world that is being denied in relation, not merely to the properties of other worlds, but in relation, in complementality, to the very existence, the assertiveness, even aggressiveness of other worlds (1993, 14-15).

It is imperative that we make a distinction between the African world which did not come into existence in reaction to any other world, *being*, and whose essence is existential, and the African world that is expressed or availed for epistemological purposes: *consciousness*. The first world, *being*, is in my opinion what Soyinka is thinking of when he says that "... the masses of *baiki mutane*... know themselves what they are, and their daily existence is testimony to the unique reality of their racial being" (1993, 37). However, in this era and time, we must question Soyinka's use of the term "racial being" because being African now transcends race as defined by biology.

Rather than use race as defined by biology, I propose two ways in which we can theorise the concept of being African: law and culture. In an attempt to define Kenya, Amuka (1997, 89) says the following:

The guiding assumption in this essay is that Kenya is a word breathed into being by human beings. A word inscribed geographically, culturally, historically, politically and socially. In other words the word is both fiction and fact. It covers a range of identities, including the individual and ethnic. Individual identities are best expressed by personal identity cards and fingerprints. Ethnic differences are largely cultural and linguistic.

If we replaced the word Kenya with Africa, the quote would not be any less meaningful. Identity cards and fingerprints are recognised in law as proving one's identity and nationality. It is identity so defined that I choose to call the legal approach to being

African. This has nothing to do with race for the simple reason, as far as I know, that one need not be black to acquire a Kenyan identity card or any other proof of identity in any African country. Those Asians, Europeans, Arabs and other races that have acquired citizenship in any African country by birth or naturalisation can therefore rightfully claim to be legally African. Africa here is defined politically and legally, as constituted by the specific countries, because legal systems are also political institutions. Each country has its own political and legal structures that govern the affairs of its citizens. Identity defined from this perspective is fairly straightforward and can be negated or asserted at the stroke of a pen. The individual is not obliged to conform to any communal moral or customary systems. Emotional attachment to Africa is not mandatory or even practically necessary. Indeed, one definitely need not be positively inclined to any of the cultures within the continent. Therefore a white supremacist in the order of Ku Klux Klan, if he managed to somehow lie his way into being issued with a Kenyan identity card, would from then on be deemed as a *bona fide* Kenyan and politically speaking, an African.

The second way to theorise being African is through the use of culture. When Amuka talks of ethnic differences being defined by culture and languages, this is the perspective he is referring to. Critics of this approach will cite ethnic differences as an indication of the dubious veracity of defining Africans culturally. This position is caused by two problems: misunderstanding of the meaning of culture; and, consequently, misunderstanding of the meaning of an African culture. I shall begin by dealing with the misunderstanding of culture. Culture should not be understood as outside politics, economics, history, race or ecology. If it is understood to embrace all these systems then we shall cease to treat culture as something immutable, fixed and fossilised. We must understand, as Ngugi (1993) puts it that “[c]ulture develops within the process of a

people wrestling with their natural and social environment. They struggle with nature, they struggle with one another. They evolve a way of life embodied in their institutions and certain practices. Culture becomes the carrier of their moral, aesthetic and ethical values” (27).

In this context we must also understand that culture is not about individuals but about communities. Western culture is not individualistic because there are people in the western world who subscribe to individualism but because the communities collectively uphold and approve of individualism. This is not to suggest that there are no individuals or even groups that practice communalism in the west, but it is to suggest that such groups are usually the exception rather than the rule. Ngugi therefore makes sense when he says that at a psychological level, the aesthetic and ethical values “...become an embodiment of the people’s consciousness as a specific community” (27). When Mbiti (1969) says that “Africans are notoriously religious, and each people has its own system with a set of beliefs and practices (1)”, he is not suggesting that there are no atheists, agnostics and sceptics in Africa. He is simply suggesting that culture is not an individual thing. We cannot therefore even suggest that to be regarded as a cultural insider one must necessarily agree with or like all of his/her community’s cultural practices. The word culture should be seen as referring to a holistic system. Un/subscription to specific ideas or practices cannot determine whether or not one is defined by that culture. I think that this is the point that Mbiti (1969) is making when he says:

Those few Europeans who claim to have been “converted” to African religions - and I know some who make such fantastic claims! - do not know what they are saying. To pour out libation or to observe a few rituals like Africans does not constitute a conversion to traditional religion (4).

It means that, unlike legal identities, cultural identities cannot be formed overnight or at the stroke of a pen. Culture is inscribed in the psyche of a people. A person's culture is therefore not to be defined by the physical manifestations of his actions but in the degree to which his action is a reflection of what is in his psyche. What is therefore paraded for tourists in African countries and/or performed in cultural festivals, such as the schools and colleges music festivals in Kenya, should be seen, to use Ngugi's word's, "...as reactionary backward elements in people's cultures...fossilised in museums or paraded as irrelevant, static traditionalism labelled as the authentic remnants and manifestation of true African culture" (43). In brief then, culture is "totality of knowledge and behaviour, ideas and objects, that constitutes the common heritage of a society" (Maquet 1972, 4).

Maquet's definition of culture invites the kind of scepticism displayed by Appiah. Is there an African culture in the sense of Maquet's definition? Scholars are not agreed on the answer to this question. There are some, especially in recent times, who are becoming increasingly sceptical about the existence of an African culture. There are others who, though critical of negritude and Pan-Africanism, still insist on the idea of the existence of an African cultural world. What emerges from the two sides of the scholarship is that there are three issues to be dealt with: the presence of people whose cultural allegiance falls outside the continent; the multiplicity of ethnic groups for those whose cultural allegiance is within the continent; and the blacks in the Diaspora whose cultural allegiance is continental Africa. First, I think Soyinka has convincingly dealt with the question of cultural affiliation. His suggestion is that history and reality demand that Africa's cultural boundaries be different from her political boundaries. There is no reason therefore why Libyans or Sudanese in the north should not be culturally Arabs and legally/politically Africans. This would also apply to white South

Africans, Kenyan whites, Asians, etc., and even black Africans whose dominant cultural subscription is to systems outside the continent. In the same breath, any one (black or white) living outside Africa but whose cultural allegiance is Africa is, for all practical purposes, culturally African. Within this framework, Appiah is correct when he says that “identities are complex and multiple and grow out of a history of changing responses to economic, political, and cultural forces, almost always in opposition to other identities” (176). The Sudanese may therefore find himself oscillating between an African and an Arab identity at different times.

The more problematic issue regards cultural unity. Anthropologists, linguists, historians, philosophers and even literary critics have investigated this problem. Appiah (1992, 80), for example, argues that “...: there are only so many traditions with their complex relationships and, as often their lack of any relationship – to each other”. Wiredu (1996) and Hountondji (1983), though not as explicit as Appiah, also reject the idea of an African cultural world. Wiredu suggests that there are cultural particulars for any community but that there are also universals that transcend race and form the basis of human communication across the world. One can therefore argue that African communities do not share culture with each other on any special basis but on the same basis that they share with other human communities across the world.

Maquet, an anthropologist, provides two important justifications for the cultural unity of black Africa or Africa south of the Sahara: diffusion of cultures due to movement; and the emergence of similar cultural practices in response to a common natural environment. In regard to diffusion, it has been historically demonstrated by many scholars that majority of African ethnic groups did not originate in their present day location. They migrated from elsewhere. In the course of migration, there were cultural

exchanges with appreciable consequences. Maquet, for example, says “the Bantu migrations stirred up a cultural mixing continent-wide in extent” (25). Historians have demonstrated that many African communities have borrowed and exchanged many cultural practices and ideas in the course of their migration to and from different parts of the continent. The Kikuyu, for example, are said to have borrowed the name *Ngai* for God from the Maasai’s *enkai*. The Shona of Zimbabwe not only share the idea of calling uncles “fathers” but actually use *babamunini* and *babamukuru* to mean the younger and elder “father” respectively in exactly the same way that the Kikuyu of Kenya do. The Luhya and the Luo, even though belonging to Bantu and Nilotic linguistic groups respectively, share the same word for God, *Nyasaye*. The arbitrary fixing of boundaries in the scramble for Africa also means that identical cultural groups are located in different countries of Africa. Achebe (1975) tells us that the Fulani “inhabit the northern savannahs of Western Africa from Cameroun and Nigeria westward to Mali and Senegal” (55). The Maasais are found in Kenya as well as in Tanzania, Somalis are in Kenya as well as in Somalia. Luos are found in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, and the list can be continued indefinitely. The point being made is not a case for metaphysical unity in the sense of a coherent monolithic system in Africa but a case for unity in diversity deriving from common sources and exchanges. That, I suggest is the basis for Afrocentricity.

Soyinka and Asante have captured this scenario much more succinctly than I possibly could. Soyinka says that “[w]hen we speak of a black African culture...we refer clearly both to a sum of its various parts and to its unifying essence. Just as there are minorities in every political state so are there cultural minorities in any convenient cultural division” (1993, 24). Asante (1993) says that the idea of Africa’s cultural unity refers to the “... the sum total of African philosophy, behaviour, ideas, and artefacts” (4) and

that, “Although the precise actions and ideas may differ” (4), the differences are “within acceptable range and still remain squarely in the category of African culture” (4). The issue here is not equity but relatedness.

This leads us to the final basis for arguing the cultural unity of Africa. It is Ngugi (1993) who says, “culture is a product of people’s history” (42), and that “it also reflects that history and embodies a whole set of values by which a people view themselves and their place in time and space” (42). Few scholars would doubt that in colonialism Africa has experienced a common history. My suggestion is that that common history could not have failed to create a common culture. The history of Africa obviously did not start with colonialism but her history, as we have already suggested, involved migration, wars, conflict, and assimilation and hence mixings, borrowings and conquests. In some instances the mixings and borrowings were so intense and one-sided that some communities became extinct, such as the Gumba and the Dorobo in their encounter with Kikuyus (Muriuki 1974). Others such as the Suba of Mfangano island in Kenya are still in the throes of such domination. The Suba can now hardly distinguish their Subanness from their Luoness. It is these kind of encounters, I suggest, which led to many similar cultural practices across Africa. Diop (1962), for example, has demonstrated the matriarchal nature of majority of black Africa’s cultures in antiquity.

In terms of commerce, Africa’s economic environment, with the exception of a few countries such as Egypt and Mali, has largely been the same. Maquet (1972) has had this to say about Africa in the seventies and earlier:

As we have said elsewhere, the life experiences of the hunter, the forest cultivator, the savannah agriculturist and the pastoralists are different. However they have this in common: obtaining the necessities of life is not easy and requires constant effort; survival is always unsure, for the margins narrow and every year there is critical period of scarcity. In this narrow but fundamental aspect, the African’s existential experience is everywhere the same (21).

Since then, there have of course been many changes, but the changes have been within a similar ecological, historical and economic environment. While I grant Appiah's suggestion that Africans share a common ecology, economics and politics as correct, I am also arguing that that same commonality has impacted on the emerging cultures. I have, in the course of these pages, intimated that culture is both a product and a process. Black Africa has, as a result of many years of growing together, in a similar environment, created a common culture. And that culture is still in the making because societies are not static but dynamic. Africans whose lives operate within the dictates of these cultures are, in my opinion, African at the level of being in Sartre's sense. At this level they do not speak or act in order to make a point. They are the thousands of Africans, who on a daily basis go about the business of living without once doubting their Africanity or even feeling the need to articulate it. Their behaviour is determined by pragmatic socially constructed or conditioned considerations in order to meet practical needs in life such as marriage, burial, child naming, wealth distribution, war, farming, harvesting and many other issues.

Let me give an example from my own experience to demonstrate this point. In 1996, I lost my brother-in-law in a road accident. He and I come from different ethnic groups but married into a third ethnic group. He was a devout Christian, as are his mother, brother and sister. His father also believes in Christianity. We travelled from Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya, to Majengo, a small rural town in western Kenya, for the burial. We had a retinue of church ministers, elders, choir members and other personnel. We had printed burial programmes with scripture readings and a minister to deliver a sermon. The ceremony was being videotaped as well as captured in still photographs. All Christian rituals over, it was time to bury him. The pallbearers carried

the casket and placed it against a wall of a newly built hut. They opened the casket and for sometime there was some obscure activity going on while the casket's lid remained opened such that the mass of people could not see what was happening.

Soon the casket was closed again and moved to the grave for lowering. Many of us then noticed what had been going on. They had removed his tie and shoes and, as I understand now, made sure that the body was not dressed in underpants. The Luhya, like their Luo neighbours, believe that a man should not be buried in a tie or underpants as that would choke him and may cause him, as related in Cohen and Odhiambo (1992, 61), to come back and haunt those that buried him like that. My sister-in-law was entreated to remain in Majengo for purposes of performing certain rituals with regard to her departed husband. An attempt was made to make her perform some on that very day. She refused and caused a stir by shouting and invoking her Christianity in order to circumvent the rituals. She was let off and the burial went on without further skirmishes. Her mother-in-law, also a Christian, remained behind as we made the journey to Nairobi the following morning. When she came to Nairobi a few days later, she had shaved her head and we all knew she had done it in conformity with traditional cultural demands.

This story testifies to the complexity of constructing being African. My sister-in-law followed all rituals except the ones she felt were in contradiction to scripture and her convictions as a Christian. In spite of shaving, her mother-in-law did not feel she had compromised her faith. A few Sundays later, she was in church giving thanks to God and expressing appreciation for the support that the church had shown her in time of grief. Hers is an explication of the African dual heritage. Did she do wrong? Did her shaving make her less of a Christian? Or did her return to church a few Sundays later

make her less of an African? It is my submission that those questions should be answered in the negative. She was simply being a contemporary African. Her combination of head shaving and church attendance to mourn the death of her son was not done to prove to a western world that Luhya's believe in respecting their dead and that they are also Christians, she was simply being African. In her we have a perfect explication of Sartre's assertion that "The existent is a phenomenon; this means that it designates itself as totality of qualities. It designates itself and not its being. Being is simply the condition for all revelation. It is being for revealing and not revealed being" (1993, xxv). In other words in order to be revealed, one must first be. Being precedes revelation. Her Africanness came forth not because there was a need for its revelation but because that is what she is. She was neither hiding nor revealing being. She was just being herself: an African.

If Afrocentricity is to be viewed as a discourse about being African, there are ways in which its relationship with feminism can be characterised as that of competition. While being African must find its inspiration from the cultural dimensions of specific African communities, feminism would want to challenge some of those very foundations because they are oppressive to women. On the other hand there are ways in which feminism and Afrocentricity can be seen as parallel or even complimentary discourses. Writing about African philosophy, Imbo (1998, 136) raises at least four points of merger between African philosophy and feminism. It seems to me that these points also apply to Afrocentricity. In any case Afrocentricity can, generally speaking, be seen as African philosophy. He says that 1) that both share a rejection of the dominant traditions and a striving to bring new perspectives to social issues as held by the dominant groups, men for feminism and whites for Afrocentricity; 2) that both are committed to examining the structures of power and its operations; 3) that both are suspicious of the

categories in which the dominant traditions deal; and 4) that both seek to engage in practices whose intellectual tools do not deny agency arbitrarily to “others”.

These points make sense when the subjects are African man (African philosopher) and white/European woman (feminist). My assumption here is that the African philosopher is also Afrocentric. Difficulties arise when the subject is both African and feminist. At various times both feminism and African philosophy/Afrocentricity assume positions of dominance and become institutions whose powers and perspectives need challenging. At such times, both systems deny agency to the African woman/feminist. Difficulties arise in the specific explication and application of these points of merger. This leads to differences of opinion over which structures and institutions to deconstruct and how that deconstruction should be conducted. It is within this logic that Ogunjipe-Leslie (1994) is to be understood when she says that “there are very deep cultural differences between Europe and Africa regarding the how and why of life”. Glo Chukukere (1998, 138-139) is operating within the same boundaries when she gives the first two markers of Nigerian feminism, largely similar to African feminism, as 1) not being antagonistic to Nigerian men and 2) as one willing to accept some institutions as valuable even though repugnant to western feminists. It is within the same context that African women argue that they are “victims of multiple oppressions that are internally generated by oppressive customs and practices, and externally induced by an equally oppressive, inegalitarian world order” (Nnaemeka 1997a, 21).

The Afrocentricity of feminism therefore, in my opinion, in this thesis, is to be found in the writer’s ability to interrogate issues affecting women from the perspective of an African as well as a feminist. It is going to be reflected in the ability of the writer to reflect cultural literacy in the communities being mirrored and to challenge oppressive structures within them as an insider. This is important because it is culture that

determines our values and attitudes. And as Wiredu (1996, 21) says, “a human *person* is the product of culture” [emphasis in text]. Without culture there is no person. The African human person is no doubt formed out of African culture. Asante (<http://www.asante.net/articles/guadalupe-asante.html>) therefore makes sense when he says “[w]e contend that human beings cannot divest themselves of culture. They are either participating in their own historical culture or that of some other group”. He therefore concludes that Afrocentricity should concern itself with the issue of the African people as “centred, located and grounded” and hence inscribed as agents in human history. In the following chapters, I examine specific Kenyan women writers with a view to examining how they deal with feminist issues while located in an Afrocentric cosmological and epistemological environment, and at the same time challenging some of the structures, institutions and practices that constitute African culture. I position myself as neither a feminist nor a critic of feminism at work, but as a male literary critic trying to establish the presence and nature of feminism in the texts examined.

In their Voices: Short Stories by Kenyan Women

African women writers are writing from the crossroads and, at the same time writing the crossroads. Obioma Nnaemeka (1995) in "Feminism, rebellious women, and cultural boundaries: reading Flora Nwapa and her compatriots"

In this chapter, I deal with short stories by Kenyan women and specifically those published in two anthologies: *Our Secret Lives: An Anthology of Poems and Short Stories by Kenyan Women Writers*, published in 1990, and *They Have Destroyed the Temple*, which was published in 1992. The two anthologies contain a total of twenty-four short stories and nineteen poems, all except one dealing with women's experience in Kenya. The exception is a short story titled *A Woman Indeed*, by Ritender Grewal Mogoi (1991), which is set in New Delhi and deals with the cruelty of the Indian dowry system where women are seen as assets by father-in-laws and as liabilities by their own fathers. In this story, Deepu, the daughter is betrothed to a bank clerk and since the bank clerk is apparently rich or on his way to riches, Deepu's father is supposed to pay a fortune. Since he is not very rich, his daughter's marriage reduces him to a miserable old man since the dowry wipes out the family bank balance. On the wedding day the groom's father humiliates Deepu's father calling him a pauper and demanding that he pays more money before the marriage can be solemnised. Deepu, against custom, speaks against the humiliation and demand for money, cancels the wedding and decides to pursue a career in sales instead. By the end of the story she has climbed up the ladder in her work place to the level of a director. This story is interesting because, though not dealing with Kenyan culture, it shows how even when roles are reversed, dowry still puts women in an unfavourable position. Sons are valorised in Africa where they pay dowry as well as in India where they receive it. In both cases patriarchy uses culture to marginalise women in reference to power.

The rest of the short stories read more like diaries and personal recollections of the particular women writers, or women encountered by the authors, than artistic works. While I am in agreement with Nnaemeka (1997a) that we must refrain from treating African creative writings as anthropological texts, there is a sense in which, given the circumstances of their production, the stories invite us to treat them as fairly accurate records of women's actual experiences in Kenya. Most of them read like ideological statements, have characters devoid of depth, simple linear plots, undeveloped but didactic themes, and nearly half of them have first person narrative voices suggesting that the writers want the narratives to be viewed as personal experiences. While this may be viewed as an artistic weakness by some critics, I think the chosen form of creative expression provides the women with a forum to address their own intimate experiences without being bogged down by the demands conventional forms. It therefore becomes the women's way of creating freedom of expression for themselves. Therefore, although not much can be said of most of the stories in terms of quality, I think they are nevertheless very important in the study of Kenyan women's interpretation and vision of their place in society. They are important first because of the background of their production. In the introduction to *Our Secret Lives* (Kabira, Karega and Nzioki, 1991), the editors reveal that the poems and short stories carried in the anthologies are a result of a workshop that was held in 1990 in Nakuru to "...evaluate the contributions of Kenyan women to the continuing debate on and about women" (Kabira, Karega and Nzioki 1991, *Introduction*). The women were invited to the workshop to "contribute artistic works about their 'secret lives'." The editors argue that the women therefore reveal "experiences that they would only share with close friends". In the introduction to *They Have Destroyed the Temple*, (Kabira, Karega and Nzioki, 1992) the editors posit that the women "wrote creatively about either their own personal experiences or those of other women they had known". We are therefore invited to treat

the stories as deep and true revelations of particular Kenyan women's experiences. A good demonstration of this is the story *Mother of Daughters* by Pat Ngurukie. This is based on a story that was widely reported in the Kenyan press in which a man literally gouged out his wife's eyes using a knife. The stories and poems are meant to be a "contribution [of] the women's struggle to make themselves heard as well as to evaluate their relationship with and in society" (Kabira, Karega and Nzioki 1992, *Introduction*). In the same introduction, the editors argue that the stories are "Kenyan women's contribution to the struggle for women's liberation; a liberation from all forces of oppression be they cultural, social, economic or political; a struggle for self-affirmation, self-liberation and the realisation of women's full potential as human beings". These two anthologies mark the first and only time, as far as I am aware, that Kenyan women have come together to creatively articulate their perspectives on gender issues. While Ogot and Macgoye may have been staging lone battles against patriarchy, these anthologies demonstrate a sense of sisterhood and collectivism against women's oppression.

Ogot and Macgoye, representing the earlier generation of women, more in terms of ideology than age, occupy and articulate paradoxical positions in terms of women's liberation. They want to be critical of and yet defend their men. They are critical of traditions yet defend the same traditions against unjustified Eurocentric criticism. They see society as an all-inclusive body, where both men and women are responsible even for the so-called patriarchal institutions, that are both limiting as well as enhancing. They distance themselves from feminism yet appropriate ideas from the philosophy. On the other hand, these two anthologies seem to represent an ideological shift. The new women are critical and ready to repudiate tradition and less amenable to defending it. They are critical and ready to repudiate their men. Rather than blame entire social

institutions and systems, which they view themselves as part and parcel of, they articulate a discourse of victimhood in which men are the aggressors and women are the victims. While acknowledging that there are instances when men are equally victims of socialisation, the women blame men for their woes and distance themselves from practices that are oppressive to their kind. This approach is evident in the editors' cataloguing of the themes in the anthology. They list them as rape, battering, disinheritance, denial of love, marital problems, general harassment and women's domestication. All these imply that the stories are dealing with evils that men do to women. For the first time in Kenyan women's fiction, we have a character in Mary Ngechu's story, *The Other Woman*, who defines herself as a feminist, suggesting that the new women are more willing to accommodate/embrace the term in comparison with the earlier generation of women writers.

Although I do not think that these stories can be described as Eurocentric, it is interesting that they employ Eurocentric tools much more easily than Macgoye or Ogot. The body as subject, object and site for women's marginalisation, for example, features eloquently in these short stories. This is not characteristic of most African women's texts be they creative or works of literary criticism. However western critical works, with their emphasis on the importance of sexuality to women's liberation inevitably have to focus on the body. *They Have Destroyed the Temple* is a good example of the Kenyan women's deviation from the norm and their attention to the body as embodying the injustice that women have experienced from their male folk. The title is taken from a poem of that title written by Pauline Kahenya in which she theorises woman's body as a temple that men have desecrated/destroyed. She describes women as "weightless weight of wasted bodies" (Kahenya 1992, 70) or as temples in ruins. She uses the body to foreground women's silencing. Their tongues are seen as "swollen tongues that stick to

the palate” (70), indicating violence on women’s bodies. In this poem, men are the destroyers and women, and specifically their bodies, are the temples that are in ruins as a result of men’s insane activities. This provides a second reason why studying the stories is important in understanding the gender problem in Kenya. One of the questions that begs exploration is how come the writers in this anthology seem to come out openly against men as opposed to the previously published women writers. I would like to suggest that these two anthologies are strongly connected to the sociology of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector in Kenya which is largely western funded. It is interesting, for example, that the Swedish International Development Agency through Karen Himmelstrand supported this workshop. During the early 1990s many international donor agencies had begun attaching conditions to their support. Indeed in the 1985 women’s conference in Nairobi, one of the issues of concern was how to get funding without being tied to donor demands. It is also interesting that one of the editors of the two anthologies, Wanjiku Kabira, is the founder and director of the Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development. This Kabira led NGO was at the centre of the break up of the Women's Political Caucus. Kabira was the convenor of this organization which brought together various NGOs in Kenya for purposes of lobbying for women’s political representation and fair play. Money was at the heart of the break up (Oriang, 2000). NGOs in Kenya, even gender based ones, have on many occasions been suspected of being more in pursuit of donor funds rather than correcting social imbalance such as, in this case, gender equity. One of the questions that might be worth investigation, which however is not the concern of this thesis, is how far the women might have been simply dancing to the tune of donors.

A second interesting thing about the production process of these stories is the fact that the project which led to the publication of these two anthologies took place five years

after the United Nations Decade for Women conference was held in Nairobi, Kenya. In a way these stories build on the proceedings and experience of that conference. Many people, notably male leaders and readers, were critical of the conference, arguing that a lot of the ideas expressed and advocated in the conference contradicted African ways of life. The argument was that the conference was largely driven by western and Eurocentric value standards. In these contexts it may be argued that the stories in these two anthologies also reflect the kinds of discourses that the donors, invariably western ones, would have liked to hear. On the other hand, it might also be argued that these women are answering back those charges of imbibing eurocentric norms by asserting their concerns. Nevertheless, it is my submission that on the whole, the stories cast gender activism from an Afrocentric perspective.

These anthologies are also important, for the purpose of my project, because they represent diverse Kenyan communities. Whereas Ogot, Macgoye, Ogola and Rebeka Njau provide studies of single communities, namely Luo and Kikuyu, the anthologies have contributions from women of diverse backgrounds. The Luo, Kikuyu, Luhya, Asian, Kamba and the Meru communities are represented. This gives me reason to suggest that the ideas arrived at in this thesis can legitimately be called Kenyan in spite of the fact that not every ethnic community is represented. Indeed the project that gave birth to these two anthologies was the culmination of a “workshop that brought together over sixty women from all walks of life, old and young, rural and urban” (Kabira, Nzioki and Karega 1992, *Introduction*), who then took time to read and discuss the stories and poems they had written. Although the stories and poems are listed under specific individual authors, there is a sense in which each of them bears the stamp of the other women who contributed by way of criticism/appreciation before the creative

works were published. It is for this reason that I am willing to read the poems and stories as representative of an emerging approach to women's issues in Kenya.

My focus in this chapter is three-fold. I am particularly concerned with how the women deal with the politics of the body; their interpretation of the concept "the private is political", especially in regard to domestic violence and sex within the institution of marriage; and the women's critical examination of African cultural practices. Thematically speaking, which is the approach I take in this chapter, the women seem to break gender issues into three branches. First is a concern with body politics where rape and domestic violence take centre stage, with men being viewed as the aggressors and women as victims. Secondly there is a focus on traditions in which both men and women are equally captives as well as victims; and finally an examination of cultural practices which are in themselves good but which have been abused by both sexes to the detriment of women. As will become clear in the course of the analysis, my three concerns/themes are related to each other.

In regard to the body, these short stories seem to be an actualisation of Helen Cixous' (1975) call, in her article, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, for women to write using their bodies. I am not here referring to the common understanding of this article as suggesting that women write differently because of their sexual difference, but rather to Cixous' call for women to let their bodies be heard. The import of Cixous' essay is that men have as violently driven women away from writing as from their own bodies. Writing is a way of expressing one's self and it is therefore related to the issue of identity. Writing indicates self-consciousness. Identity, in the context of self-consciousness, involves both mind and body. Cixous' call for women to not only write but to also write their bodies, is a call for women to define themselves as opposed to

letting men define them. In essence, therefore, writing for women is a way of recovering both body and psyche/intellect/mind, which have been denigrated by man. My argument is that the authors of these short stories focus on the body to demonstrate the extent of violation that has taken place in women's lives. Their bodies speak of the women's experiences.

Mary Ngechu's *The Other Woman* (1992) captures one of the most graphic representations of this scenario. Ngechu employs suspense, psychology, twists and turns in the narrative to tell of a deeply troubled woman. Told in the first person, the story opens with an unexpected visit by a strange woman to Wairi's, the narrator's, house in the city. Without introducing herself, the strange woman, whose name we later learn is Wanjiru, begins to frantically search Wairi's house. Wairi is spellbound by the intensity of Wanjiru's suffering. Wanjiru is like one possessed by strong demonic forces. Images of demonic possession become apparent when Wanjiru falls down in exhaustion and Wairi tries to come to her rescue. Wanjiru strikes back as fast as a snake and then bites Wairi as one ready to suck blood. It turns out later that the cause of this suffering is Frank, who had brutalised her for the last twenty years but is now living with Wairi in the city. Wairi has no idea that the man she has been living with is married with children.

At the outset, the most striking feature of Ngechu's (1992) narrative is the eloquence of Wanjiru's body in expressing the pain of her experience. She had a "withered complexion" (44), "her downcast eyes looked dead" (44) and "her mouth was drooping and depressed.... Her skin was dry and scaly...Her hands were rough and it seemed as though they had been blackened by years of toil...Her whole body seemed to be held together by strong inner forces" (44). Looking at the withered woman before her, whose

mouth was bleeding and who looked lifeless and ghostly, Wairi concludes that this woman had been “reduced to the lowest level of existence (44). What makes this narrative interesting is the development of consciousness on the part of the narrator from empathy to implication and finally to sisterhood in victimhood as well as resistance. At first she is empathetic with Wanjiru’s suffering in realisation that her arm-chair feminist pontificating was far removed from this woman’s actual experience.

As the narrative continues, however, we realise that Wairi is guilty, first because of her failure to grasp women’s actual experience, and secondly because she is implicated in a fellow woman’s suffering, albeit by default rather than design. By living with Frank in ignorance of his background, which obviously could have been easily verified had she taken the trouble of doing just a little bit of investigation, she had contributed toward Wanjiru’s neglect. When the two women confront each other they both, paradoxically, occupy positions of victim as well as aggressor. Wanjiru is an aggressor in the sense that she is attacking/assaulting an innocent Wairi who does not know that the man she is living with is someone else’s husband. In that sense Wairi is Wanjiru’s victim. On the other hand Wanjiru knows that she is attacking the woman who has stolen her man, in spite of his violence. In that regard she is Wairi’s victim.

The situation is made much more complex when Frank appears on the scene as the women are wrestling and fighting with each other and beats both of them. By this time the battle is no longer between one mad and one sane woman but between two maddened women. When Frank slaps each of them in turn, roles have been completely reversed and the two women only occupy one position: that of victims. Ngechu is suggesting that the demonic force behind the two women’s madness is Frank. After their physical abuse, Wairi is left in shock, with lungs fighting for air and feeling as

though she is going to suffocate. Wanjiru on the other hand has been transformed from a crying woman to a whimpering one. Both of the women now have anger locked in their systems unable to come out in the face of the aggressor. While Wanjiru stares at Frank with intense “fear and loathing” (46), as if she were possessed by an evil spirit, Wairi begins to feel that very same evil spirit that held Wanjiru captive was “...creeping into [Wairi’s] heart, mind and soul” (46). It is now obvious that both women are victims of Frank’s evil nature. It brings us back to Cixous’ statement “when I say ‘woman’ I’m speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man” (348).

It is not until the end of the story, however, that the two women become sisters in resistance. In spite of her feminist convictions, Wairi buys Frank’s lie that he had been forced to marry Wanjiru against his wish after she became pregnant. He lies that Wanjiru had coerced him into a sexual relationship. Frank’s brutality has taken such a toll on Wanjiru’s body that though she is much younger than him, she looks much older and he can therefore claim she used to be his teacher in primary school. While he claims that she had seduced him after his Advanced Level examinations, it turns out that he had seduced and made her pregnant when she was in high school and he was a University student at Makerere. Wairi only finds out this truth after having travelled to Wanjiru’s house in the hope of helping Frank and Wanjiru to agree on mutual separation so she could have Frank to herself. While in Wanjiru’s house, Frank arrives, realises that the truth of his past has been revealed and attempts to choke Wanjiru to death. Wairi screams for help before fainting. The screaming for help leads to the rescue of Wanjiru and the arrest of Frank. Wairi’s cry for help, though not as forceful as one might have expected of a feminist, unites the two women in a sisterhood of resistance that works.

The body for the women writers of these short stories is an iconic representation of their experience of male domination and brutality. Central to the body politic in these collections of stories is sex and violence. Domestic violence and rape are the most recurrent themes handled by these writers. What is bound to be disappointing for most feminist critics is the way the women characters in most of the narratives respond to their experience of physical and sexual violence. I shall be arguing that with a few exceptions, their responses can be summed up in terms of repression, religious escapism and rationalisation. Those who engage in repression try to sustain a culture of silence, hoping that somehow that silence will obliterate their pain. They remain in a state of denial because although they are themselves constantly aware of the pain, they think that the shame within can be camouflaged by wearing the mask of trouble-free individuals. In the second group are those who choose to find God, Christ and forgiveness. This group represses the ordeal of their experience in two ways: either they argue that they were raped because God was punishing them, or that they need not pursue the matter because God has enabled them to forgive those that violated them. In one such story, *Milestones to Marriage*, even the aggressor, the father who rapes his daughter when she is only twelve years old, finds salvation and grace and is hence reconciled to his child.

In this story, Grace Ombara uses the occasion of a wedding ceremony to explore two issues: sexual abuse by fathers and the requirement of virginity for women on their wedding day. Elizabeth, the protagonist of the story, had been raped by her father at twelve. She is a grown-up when the story opens and has previously been married and divorced on the basis of infidelity. Apparently, the fact that the husband had found out, on the first night of their wedding, that she was not a virgin is enough proof of

infidelity. When the story opens she is scheduled to get married again, this time to Mike. However, she has not been able to tell him that her father raped her when she was young and that Chet, her previous husband, divorced her when he found out that she was not a virgin. One may argue that she blackmails Mike to marry her by waiting until the wedding day, when everyone is in church to witness the ceremony, to reveal the fact that she is not a virgin. However, in the context of the fear and shame that seems to accompany every one of the rape victims characterised in the two anthologies, her action becomes completely understandable. In any case when Mike gets to know that her reluctance to get married to him is based on the fact that she is not a virgin, he dismisses that requirement as nonsense.

It emerges, through a stream of consciousness writing, that try as she might Elizabeth is not able to tell the truth to the men in her life. There are three reasons for her inability to expose her father: 1) that her father had instilled fear in her by holding a knife to her throat as he raped her; 2) that her father had been transformed by religion, asked for forgiveness, pleaded with her never to tell any one, but rather to leave judgement to God, and that he never repeated the rape; and 3) that Elizabeth feared ruining the relationship between father and son-in-law if she revealed what her father had done to her. In the end, therefore, the father remains unexposed though reconciled to his daughter through religion. Rape in this case is treated as a spiritual problem that needs a spiritual solution: forgiveness and reconciliation. This is succinctly captured in the final paragraph of this story:

The priest stood at the entrance to the church, smiling, the choir singing melodiously behind him. They marched forward to receive the bride. Elizabeth went proudly to the father, who took her by the hand. They both wept and knew the reconciliation was complete. Her mother fell in with the maids and flower-girls smiling in relief. The congregation rose as one body, to bless and send off these two young people to the land of marriage (Ombara 1991, 8).

This case is unique in the sense that the father confesses his deed to his wife. It is nevertheless quite similar to the others in the way the culture of silence is effected; the way the mothers are somehow expected or feel obliged to accept blame for the rape of their daughters; and the way in which religion is used to pacify the situation. Elizabeth had indeed complained to her mother about the way her father used to ask her to sit on his lap while he caressed her in a strange way, but the mother was too scared of the father to pursue that matter. Instead she had asked Elizabeth never to talk about it again. When Elizabeth is raped her mother feels responsible because she should have listened to her daughter. It is difficult, however, to see how she could have prevented the deed except perhaps by reporting it to the police, and she could not even have done that as there was always the threat of violence. It is unlikely that the police would have taken her seriously, especially as the rape had not actually taken place. We can make this conclusion if we compare this story with Elizabeth Gatibaru's (1992) *For My Mother's Sake*.

In this story, told in the first person narrative mode, the protagonist, whose name we never get to know, loses her father when she is only fourteen years old. Barely four months after his death, her father's best friend proposes to the mother who accepts the proposal, arguing that she wants her daughter to grow up with a father figure in the house. Two months after the marriage, Philip, the stepfather, quits his job; relies on the meagre salary of the new wife; and to make the matters worse begins drinking heavily. Although the protagonist had been an only child because the doctors had warned the mother against a second child, Philip somehow manages to convince the mother to get pregnant again after fourteen years. In spite of the complications of this second pregnancy, coupled with doctors warning that another pregnancy would be even more dangerous, the mother is pregnant again even before the new baby is half a year old. She

does not survive this pregnancy but dies leaving her daughter, now sixteen years old, in charge of the home with a drunkard for a stepfather.

Barely two months after the death of his wife, Philip rapes his stepdaughter. Unlike Elizabeth, the persona of this story is not only incensed by the dastardly act but also ready and willing to expose her rogue stepfather. With the help of a couple who are neighbours, she attempts to report the matter to the police. The male police officer, who is supposed to record the details of the case, treats the report first with suspicion and then so flippantly that the whole experience becomes another ordeal for the victim. He is so carelessly absent-minded that he at first does not understand that the man being accused is the father of the girl. When that point is emphasised, he absolves the father and accuses the girl of being the one who wanted to go to bed with her father. As he makes these accusations he is heedless of the fact that a crowd of people have gathered in the room and are listening to what he is saying. In this story as in *Milestones to Marriage*, the pattern is the same. Shame is used to keep the victims from talking about their violation. Rather than society trying to help the victims, the victims are instead made to feel somehow responsible for that same violation.

In this particular instance, the victim refuses to either accept responsibility or to repress the experience. Although shame and anger drives her out of the police station, she proposes to deal with the problem herself. It is only a sense of responsibility and respect for her mother that keeps her from killing or attempting to kill her stepfather. She goes home and threatens him with a meat-knife warning him to never touch her again or she will not hesitate to kill him. The threats do not work as Philip rapes her again only a month later. This time, after a long and agonising moment trying to erase the marks of shame on her body by scrubbing herself with soap in the bathroom again and again, the

narrator takes a knife, goes to the bedroom where her stepfather is sleeping, hits him hard and repeatedly slashes him across the face. This act would have been an example of a clean feminist reaction except that the protagonist is intimidated by her father-in-law into not accusing him of rape, when the police are called, supposedly because that would ruin the reputation of her mother. It seems that in the community, the mother would take the blame for her daughter's rape even in death. The daughter therefore ends up in an approved school for attempted murder. There is nevertheless a ray of hope in this particular story because the narrator, who is eighteen years old at the close of the narrative, is determined to let the truth be known. If turning eighteen means achieving the age of maturity, then the desire and willingness on the part of women to expose their tormentors, as represented by the heroine of this narrative, is emblematic of the coming of age of the liberation struggle.

Repression, religious escapism and rationalisation are not limited to rape cases occurring between father and daughter. *In Healing From Sexual Abuse*, by Sally Wangwe, the culprit is a house boy. Dido, the main character and victim, tells her own story about how she is raped by Oscar, their shamba-boy/farm hand. Having come from the city to spend her holiday upcountry, Dido's high spirits are dampened when Oscar tricks her into becoming late while fetching maize for her grandmother from their farm far away from home. On her way back, Oscar waylays her in the dark, hits her with a stone on the head making her fall off her bicycle and, with the help of a friend, drags her into the bush, at the same time threatening her with a knife, and rapes her. Like other rape victims in these stories, Dido attempts to repress the experience, to shut it out of her consciousness and keep it away from the public. She says, "[s]lowly I began trying to push the incident away since the criminal had taken refuge in an unknown place" (Wangwe 1991). Further:

After my holidays, I went back to school as a changed person. I always wanted to be alone while I thought things over and over again. ...I wanted to shut out everybody out of my life. The sight of a crowd made me tremble for fear that they had found out what happened to me during the holiday (50).

This attempt at repression is made impossible when she discovers that she has contracted a venereal disease. Characteristically, Dido finds it difficult to tell her parents what has happened to her because the parents are very strict and would most likely blame her for it. It is the school matron, a sympathetic and understanding woman, who comes to her rescue by encouraging her to at least tell her parents for purposes of medical attention. Dido writes to her mother pretending not to know the cause of her illness, but only claiming to be having trouble with her private parts. When she gets home for holidays, she is shocked to find that her father and mother had fought over the issue and that her mother had fled to Uganda. It is clear that like the other mothers in *Milestones to Marriage* and *For My Mother's Sake*, Dido's mother also gets blamed for the rape of her daughter. In most of these stories, men seem to turn to violence and drink whenever a problem beyond their control confronts them. Dido's father too begins to slowly turn into a drunkard. He turns up one night and beats up the house-help, leaving Dido even more burdened with all the housework. The situation becomes unbearable leading Dido to gather the courage to tell her father the whole truth.

While the father is redeemed by the fact that he takes the information calmly and understandingly, and that he organises her treatment, it is regrettable that he expresses no desire to pursue the boy who had violated his daughter. Instead, Sarah Wangwe turns to religious escapism as a way of dealing with the ordeal. Two weeks before schools open, Dido goes to church and responds to the preacher's invitation to forgive others as a condition for their own forgiveness. She therefore forgives Oscar, arguing that the fact that he had run away indicates that he knew he was living in guilt. This, in my opinion,

is another way of rationalising crime as opposed to seeking retribution. Two Sundays after her own conversion her father also gets saved following daily mornings of prayer together. He too forgives his wife for leaving him. Note that even at this point the mother still bears blame for leaving. Two weeks after this conversion the mother returns from Uganda. The story ends five years later with the family “having grown in Love” (52). While I am not suggesting there is no value in women forgiving their aggressors or finding peace and solace in religion, which seems to be the case for most of these Kenyan women, it appears to me wrong that religion should be used to let men get away with these horrible acts. It is for this reason that I suggest that the idea of seeing sexual abuse as a spiritual problem needing a spiritual solution is nothing except religious escapism. In none of these cases is any rapist convicted in a court of law. Victims forgiving criminals need not mean that criminals escape the full force of the law.

The closest we come to justice is in *Mariana* by Pauline Kimathi (1992). In this story, a gang of twenty-one young men wielding knives, clubs, chains and pangas rape Mariana, the eponymous heroine of the story. Left for the dead in the forest, Mariana is found by her parents and a search team who take her to hospital. Although rationalisation in the guise of feeling that rape is punishment by God occurs, repression does not occur in this story since Mariana is more than willing to admit everything in order to have the rogues apprehended. This willingness to tell is counteracted by a legal system that puts the burden of proof on the victim. When all twenty-one suspects are arrested, the magistrate finds them not guilty on the basis of lack of sufficient evidence. Neighbours find this judgement unsatisfactory, raise money and push for a retrial in a higher court in Nairobi. The artistry of the story is disappointing because Kimathi fails to put forward a strong and convincing case against the group, probably because of the limitations of the short story form, but it is also obvious that her concern is the way in which a rape trial

often turns the complainant into a defendant. The defence lawyer ends up accusing Mariana of having had sexual liaisons with a sugar daddy whose wife beat her, and of having been a willing participant in the rape. Implicit in the ending is the suggestion that the accused are let free once again.

In this story Kimathi's advocacy is for the establishment of vigilante groups to deal with rapists that the legal system fails to punish. The group of thugs seek vengeance for the disgrace on being put on trial by setting Mariana's home on fire. This time neighbours come out with stones, pangas and *rungus*, plus all manners of weapons, and set upon the gang. It is a woman's voice that Kimathi chooses to announce the ethic of the story "If the law cannot deal with you, we shall deal with you" (81). Mariana's father also comes to the conclusion that with the vulnerability of girls, the community has a responsibility to teach the girls survival tactics and "to establish security measures in the neighbourhood" (81). What happens to the gang of thugs is not dissimilar from what is known in Kenya as mob justice or lynching. This method of punishing crime was popularised by university students in the late 1980s who, taking leaf from the concept of "necklacing" advocated by Winnie Mandela in South Africa, burnt a burglar to death at Kenyatta University. Kenyans, frustrated by a corrupt and inefficient legal and police system that lets criminals get away with sordid acts, have adopted this method as a way of dealing with errant members of society. Kimathi is calling on society to treat rape with as much seriousness as it treats other crimes.

Her argument, like that of Mary N. Kinuthia in *Fears Come True*, is that rape is not just violence against women's bodies but also against their psyche. Mariana is so traumatised that for her, life becomes "...a living hell. Every pin drop made her jump" (Kimathi 1992, 80). In Kinuthia's story the victim, who is raped at fourteen by three

men, argues that her life was effectively ruined in that instant. She becomes suicidal, and in spite of years of counselling and sessions with psychiatrists the ghosts of her rapists hover over her psyche permanently. She is rendered incapable of a healthy relationship with men, even with those that truly love her such as David, her boyfriend.

The trauma is best captured in her own words. She says:

Although I eventually went back to school and my old friends were there, I felt rejected and this made me feel lonely, I would never share problems with anyone and I kept to myself. At times I would keep quiet for a long time then everything that had happened would appear on a screen in my mind's eye. Tears would roll down my eyes. I felt wasted, a misused object and I sometimes wished I were never born" (Kinuthia 1992, 59).

In her article, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous argues that women should write their selves because by writing, women will return "to the body which has been more than confiscated from [them], which has been turned into the stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions" (1975, 350). While not ignoring the many other nuances possible in Cixous' statement I would like to suggest that these rape cases alienate the women from their own bodies. In *Fears Come True* the victim, whose name we never get to know because the story is told in the first person narrative, describes her emotions upon regaining consciousness after being raped:

When I came to my senses, I felt embarrassed to see my own naked body. I put on my clothes and painfully walked back to the path. I did not know whether to go back home or go to my aunt's place. I felt like I was a useless object, just like used tissue paper (Kinuthia 1992, 57).

Like most of the other victims we have looked at, her first temptation is to repress the experience, hide it in the subconscious and pretend it never happened. Like Cixous, she feels that men are corporately responsible for her misfortune. In her own words, "I did not want to see any man not even my father. I hated all men" (57). Her trauma is compounded by the fact that the rape leads to pregnancy and consequent birth of a

severely deformed child who, to her relief, later dies. In many ways this child is symbolic of the victim's metaphorical death during the rape and, psychologically speaking, rebirth as a severely deformed woman when she regains consciousness.

In encouraging women to write and to write themselves, Cixous argues that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history - by her own movement" (1975, 345). Reading Cixous, there is no doubt that the maker and executor of that law is man. She also argues that writing should enable woman to "tear [herself] away from a superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires, for not having any; for being frigid, for being 'too hot'; for not being both at once; for being too motherly and for not being enough; for having children and for not having any; for nursing and for not nursing..." (351).

In discussing rape, we have already seen how women are violently driven from their bodies by being made ashamed of themselves/their bodies after being sexually abused. I have also demonstrated the way in which women are blamed for their own rape as well as that of their daughters. I now would like to turn to the issue of domestic violence as represented in the stories and argue that the women writers studied suggest that domestic violence is man's way of forcing woman to bear the guilt of the wrongs and failures of man/society. I shall also be arguing that unlike rape where man is singularly and solely held responsible, the women suggest that domestic violence can be traced to deeper forces, largely cultural, in which men are equally victims. Indeed these stories

demonstrate an attempt by the women to understand and explain the root cause(s) of violence in men.

In *The Spider's Web* by Grace Namai (1992), the argument is that man is caught in a web of violence that is transmitted from father to son. Lucy's husband, Jared, is an intensely jealous psychopath who uses violence to make Lucy bear his own guilt of infidelity. In this story, told from Anne's, Lucy's friend's, perspective, Jared tries to cover up his own unfaithfulness by accusing his wife of infidelity. On this particular night, he beats up Lucy so violently that when she manages to run off to Anne's house, stark naked, her body has so many bruises that it "...looked as if a witchdoctor had performed numerous rituals on her" (Namai 1992, 62). The marks on her body are only a pale reflection of what has happened to her psyche. Jared has, on a previous occasion, stripped her naked, after having beaten her unconscious, in order to physically examine her, using a torch, to see if she had slept with other men.

Namai uses this story to explain why women who are as habitually abused as Lucy stay in their violent relationships. One of those reasons is tied to the title of the story. The story's title, *The Spider's Web*, is so called because Lucy has grown up within an environment of domestic abuse. When her father divorces and remarries, Lucy finds herself constantly physically abused by her step-mother. She is therefore determined not to divorce, in an attempt to break that cycle of violence, fearing that if she divorced her husband, her own children would suffer the same kind of abuse she had suffered when she was young. At the same time, though Lucy never gives this as one of her reasons for staying, Namai suggests that Jared is violent because of the psychological instability of his upbringing. His father had not only physically abused him, but also neglected and hence left him a very bitter man. In many ways, Namai is arguing, like other writers in

these two anthologies, that men who are violent to their wives or children are projecting their own frustrations onto the victims. Anne, from whose perspective the story is told, concludes that Jared needs professional help. In projecting his frustrations onto Lucy, Jared is unconsciously blaming Lucy for his past.

Helen Mwanzi in *Let the Factory Close* (Mwanzi 1991) graphically captures the image of man as equally a victim in cases of domestic violence. This story centres on the bizarre demand for ritual beatings, among the Luhya of Kenya, every time a woman gets pregnant. When Arita gets married to Kuya she is shocked that three months later, only two days after the couple discovers that Arita is pregnant, Kuya beats her up demanding to know who the father of the child is. As he beats and pulls her ears, while slapping and kicking her, he accuses her of having had many 'husbands' as evidenced by the fact that she was not a virgin when he married her. When the beating comes to an end Arita is further shocked to see a dramatic transformation of her husband. In the words of the narrative voice, that night:

Kuya had then shown great enjoyment of every item of the meal served that evening. ...[T]heir intimacy that evening was special. Like one possessed of Eros himself, Kuya had given his young wife the tenderest night ever known in their marriage. He had even shown interest in her preparedness to receive him. For the first time in their marriage, Kuya had praised her responsiveness and even said 'I Love you' (114).

Arita was shocked at this change. Yet lost in the loving embraces of her husband, the urgency of his breathing and the eyes that promised to give more, to give as much and as many times over as she wanted and as she could withstand, she could not retain the shock for long. She relaxed and loved. She was loved. There was no ache anywhere. Aches were replaced with thrills that sparked and travelled throughout the body (114).

This should not be taken to mean that because of this transformation or even because of the understanding of the context in which this violence occurred, Arita condoned it. On the contrary, "[s]he never forgave the beating itself nor the inquisition and the cynicism written all over his face during the incident" (114). In fact "pain, shame and bitterness

had struck five days later when Kuya's sister had come with pounded roots and herbs meant for her and the coming baby" (115). It is then that she learns that the beating "had announced the good news to all, the news that Kuya was going to be a father" (115). Apparently the beating, coupled with the burning of all her clothes the following day was also supposed to "erase any memory in her of another man in her life" (115).

Unfortunately and strangely, though Arita does not approve of this cultural practice, she puts up with it for many years. When the story opens, she is in the process of receiving her fifth and last beating. As she remembers the very first one:

[F]our others c[o]me to her mind. Their timing was identical. The last month of her confinement had always been marked with a beating. It had become a ritual, a strange ritual. She wondered how anyone in his right mind could risk a miscarriage because of a ritual. Arita could not understand how an educated man could carry on with such an inhuman practice. It was his tiresome elder sister, the ever-smiling Sake, who had told Arita that a man was expected to salute his coming baby in style. It was not hatred; it was an integral part of love through which they had got the baby. The effective slap was a re-enactment of the effective thrust (115).

Mwanzi pre-empts our harsh judgement by the way she arranges her narrative. The history of abuse is only revealed via memory after we have encountered Arita in fierce resistance to this cultural practice. When Kuya comes to execute his fifth ritual beating, Arita hits him with a "burning charcoal stove" "...pouring all the burning charcoal onto him" (111). At this stage, Arita is ready to use her cooking stick, a panga or a steaming pot of maize and beans to defend herself if necessary. In keeping with the ritualistic nature of the domestic confrontation, Kuya, though surprised at his wife's reaction does not react as angrily as we would expect. Instead, he pleads with her to massage the bruises she has caused him, arguing that he too massages her when he bruises her. Rather than an outburst of anger he endearingly refers to her as "Daughter of the great ones" (116). In response, she carefully supplies him with ice cubes to cool his burning self. Kuya wakes up early the next morning to request that the coming baby be their last

child. It is then that we learn, even more surprisingly, that Kuya has “closed the factory” meaning that he has had a vasectomy. This is surprising because in practice, very few Kenyan men would agree to have a vasectomy. Many men, like Joe in *The Footstool*, insist that their women/wives take pills or undergo tubal ligation as a birth control measure.

In this story we have an example of how women are blamed for everything, as Cixous has suggested, irrespective of what they do. They are, for example, blamed for bearing children as well as for not bearing them. In this case, paradoxically, even praise has to come in the shape of blame. Arita is beaten up in celebration of the fact that she has got pregnant. This violence is sanctioned by society, including its women. The women in this narrative do not rise in condemnation of Kuya’s violence. Arita’s sister-in-law, for instance, suggests that the ritual beating should only be understood in its cultural context and then borne bravely. Those who interpret the beatings as wrong blame Arita for it.

Friends had blamed her for allowing herself to be handled violently while in that stage or at any other stage. Her mother-in-law had blamed her for not knowing her husband’s moods after so many years and therefore annoying him to the extent that he had been forced to consider it fit to teach her a lesson when she was so advanced in pregnancy. It was the wife's bounden duty to avert blows, to avoid being beaten (116).

In the context of this story and others, such as *The Match* by Asenath Odaga (1991), in which women seem to directly and actively contribute to fellow women’s oppression, exploitation or abuse, it is hard not to see women-on-women oppression as emblematic of some elements in Cixous’ (1975) postulation that:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism (349).

The difference between these women and Cixous, and I suggest that this is one of the indications of their Afrocentricity as opposed to Cixous' Eurocentricity, is that they do not see the situation as solely a men-versus-women opposition. In Kuya's case, he is bearing the burden of tradition as imposed on him by his mother. Indeed, he too feels that he is a victim of customs as embodied and enforced by custodians such as his mother. Alerted by his wife, for example, to the fact that his mother might not like the idea of their stopping bearing children after the fifth one, Kuya responds:

Mother will have to like it. She has made enough decisions for us in this family. It's more than eight years you know. I bear the entire responsibility of sinning, ritualising, feeding and bringing up the children. You look exhausted. I can see your brain and entire body are giving in. These burns testify to it. Do I need a magician to tell me that (Mwanzi 1991, 117).

In an interview with me in 1998, Wanjiku Kabira, one of the leading gender activists in Kenya, and one who compares her passion for gender equity with missionary work, demonstrated the ways in which men are themselves victims of an alienating socialising process. In 1984 she had carried out research in Kiambu based on women's contribution to economic development. The research centred on issues of "land control, access to resources, women's perception of themselves and their contributions and so on". After interviewing both men and women, she discovered that the women thought men overestimated their own contribution to society. On the other hand, she discovered that men were enduring intense frustrations in their inability to fulfil their perceived socially defined roles as heads of their families. In Wanjiku's words:

...the more we discussed with the men, the more we realised the kind of frustrations that the men faced in not being able to be a man, as the head of the family. You have no resources, you have no land, no money, you actually cannot be a man except being male. And they would tell you that it is very frustrating to actually be in the house when you are being asked to contribute something and you do not have. To fight the struggle, then you move away and you wake up everyday and leave as if you are going to work (Kabira 1998).

Kabira's conclusion in that interview with me was that in a way "...the socialisation process is also hostile to the men." Society has placed certain expectations on men without "...providing the resources to enable" them to become men in the ways expected of them. "The process of alienation is very strong where men are concerned.... They are suffering because they cannot fulfil their roles as men within that society". I think it is within this context too that we should understand the handling of domestic violence as a theme by writers in these two anthologies. There is a sense in which they argue that violence is an expression of man's frustrations in his inability to fulfil his socially defined obligations. Men cover up or deal with their own failures by being violent.

In *The Other Woman*, for example, Frank tries to shield himself from his ignominious past as a rapist and village rogue by being violent toward his wife. In *All in One*, Camelyn Wanjiru (1991) tells the story of a father who brutalises his children after the death of his wife in an attempt to control them. The father, who remains unnamed in this very short narrative, is very much like the men that Kabira interviewed in Kiambu. He habitually leaves the house for the local trading centre where he and other men spend the whole day chatting and drinking. After the death of his wife, his lazy and irresponsible drinking habits mean that he is unable to continue educating the children. Instead, he chases the young sons away from home. The two sons attempt to cope by street vending and engaging in business respectively. It appears to me that he keeps the girls back home hoping to keep them as domestic helps to cook and wash for him. In an attempt to cope with these difficult circumstances, one of the girls turns to prostitution while the other, through whom the story is told, seeks help from a priest. The priest assists her with decent clothes before introducing her to a counselling and rehabilitation centre where she enrolls to continue her studies.

The pattern in this narrative is similar to the events in *For My Mother's Sake*. In both cases the death of the mother leaves a husband who, unable to exercise control over his children, turns to physical abuse and/or sexual abuse. In many ways the same principle is in operation in *The Match*, although in this case it's the father who dies. In this instance, Asenath Odaga tells the story of a polygamous man who dies leaving his eldest son, Dajo, to take care of his family as required by custom. Culture demands that Dajo becomes responsible for each of his father's wives who does not have a grown up son. Dajo picks on the youngest wife and step-mother, being the most vulnerable, and attempts to marry off her daughter at sixteen. Daughter and mother, however, see no reason for the marriage and Milenye, the daughter, certainly does not like Ura, the chosen suitor. When they resist the proposed forced marriage, Dajo becomes violent to both mother and daughter. This, in my opinion, is another instance where women argue that men become violent in frustration at their inability to exercise control over women. Society assigns leadership and authority to men over women on the assumption that men are able to create enough wealth to provide for their women. When men are unable to create that wealth, the only way to control the women is through violence. Poverty is therefore central to violence against women.

It is important to add that the women writers are by no means suggesting that men should be excused, when they become violent, because they are allegedly caught in the demands of cultural obligations. The stories encourage women to actively resist abusive husbands. Although none of the abusive husbands ends up in court charged with his crime, let alone being convicted, these women characters (the victims) are not like Paulina in Macgoye's *Coming to Birth*, whose achievement was to avoid blows.

Resistance in some of these stories is so active that in two of the stories, *The Historic Judgement*, by Mwikali Kieti (1991), and *Rosa*, by Asenath Odaga (1992), the abusive men are killed by their female victims. In *The Historic Judgement*, the judgement is called historic because Naima, the victim of domestic abuse, is set free on the basis of self-defence from charges of having killed her husband. Similarly, Rosa, who fights and kills her assailant, Dan, is set free on grounds of self-defence. Dan, who is brother to Rosa's boyfriend, Makau, attempts to rob and rape her as a way of dealing with his own failure, career wise, and to get back at his successful brother. Rosa is not only a financially independent career woman but also a gender activist who, knowing the violent nature of men, has prepared herself by training in karate for self-defence. Because of her education, economic empowerment and experience, Rosa is careful to record Dan's previous visits and threats on an audio-cassette as well as in her diary. These are used in court in her defence. And it is not only the educated urban women who are actively resistant. In *The Match*, Milenye knocks Dajo unconscious, using a wooden post from their cow-pen gate. My conclusion is that although the writers understand that men, to a large extent, are also victims of the social-cultural demands and obligations that lead to the oppression of women, the writers nevertheless suggest that it is the women who bear the brunt of negative traditions, and that the only way they can rise above victimhood is to engage in active resistance.

In her article, *Feminism, Rebellious Women and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and Her Compatriots*, Obioma Nnaemeka (1995) urges critics of African literature, especially feminists, to pay attention to the cultural contexts within which the texts were created. The import of her whole paper is that the issues of speech/silence, agency/lack of agency, self/other, aggressor/victim, in African feminist discourses, cannot be accurate if formulated in terms of male/female oppositions. In this regard she

argues that Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* does in fact misrepresent women because it does not contain "slandering, backstabbing, conniving, abusive women" (90). Nnaemeka is not suggesting that men-on-women violence as a theme should be set aside or toned down, but that women-on-women violence too should be a feminist issue in African literature. Using the novels of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Ba, Nnaemeka argues that in African women's literature, by and large, we have characters who "...are reformers and catalysts for change...within the context of their cultural boundaries" (107). In essence Nnaemeka is arguing against the tendency by many western feminist critics, examples of whom she gives as Florence Stratton, Katherine Frank, Susan Gardner and others, to see African women who resist oppression as either traditional or modern. Inscribing African gender activists as modern as opposed to being traditional in effect casts them as either for or against their traditions. In practice, the women's interpretation of African culture is much more complex than that. Giving the example of polygamy, Obioma argues that there are "diverse and opposing views on the institution of polygamy" (100) and that "one can see that there are harmonious polygamous marriages and disunited ones just like some monogamous marriages are harmonious and others are acrimonious (100)." In the context of the complexity of African cultures we should therefore pay attention, as critics who employ the feminist aesthetic, to the ways in which "women uphold patriarchal systems and use them to abuse and oppress other women" (89).

That African men and women are corporately responsible for the sustenance of social institutions that, contradictory as it may sound, provide for both the enjoyment as well as the victimhood of both sexes, is articulated in the handling of cultural issues in the short stories. The women argue that while cultures are not perfect, they are not necessarily always or inherently sexist but that men, and some women, abuse the

cultures in order to oppress their victims. In many ways, the stories validate Nnaemeka's position in the sense that the writers do not see culture through the lens of a male/female opposition. They show women liberating themselves within/into their cultures rather than out of the same. The women writers considered in this chapter, therefore, though calling for the abandonment of certain outdated traditions, are not primarily concerned with the jettisoning of African cultures, but rather with the cultures being made gender sensitive/responsive and immune to abuse by both men and women. And finally, the women demonstrate that traditional cultural systems did and do provide avenues of resistance for women. Taken together, Kabira's *My Co-Wife My Sister, I Cannot Sign*, and *I Refuse to Die* and Asenath Odaga's *The Match*, explore the potential for both evil and good in the institution of polygamy as well as the provision for resistance in traditional cultural institutions.

In *The Match*, Odaga demonstrates the oppressive nature of male dominated cultural systems, namely polygamy and wife inheritance. Polygamy and wife inheritance make it possible for Milenye's mother and her children to come under the control of male relatives. It is this culturally sanctioned position of leadership/power that Dajo abuses in arranging for Milenye's marriage when she is only sixteen and still at school. The driving force behind Dajo's actions is simple: self-aggrandisement. He wants to enrich himself with the dowry that will come from Milenye's marriage. He invokes custom and traditions, even when it is clear that he alone is organising this marriage while normally, among the Luo, (as demonstrated in Ogot's novels as well as in Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source*), marriage is a communal affair. Although Milenye does not stand on an anthill as Macgoye (1998) suggests used to be done, her opposition to the marriage is explicit. In spite of the fact that Milenye's mother opposes the marriage and that no woman is in consent, except Ura's wives, Dajo still goes ahead to

arrange an abduction. This is in violation of custom and tradition because so-called abductions, as Macgoye (1998) argues, are supposed to be stage-managed with full knowledge and consent of the participants. In this instance, that is not done. Odaga is in effect arguing that the system is so loosely structured and male dominated that it is easily abused.

Dajo's behaviour is neither typical nor representative of Luo culture as some, who are not initiated into Luo culture, may be tempted to conclude. He is rather representative of what Nnaemeka (1995) calls "individual abuses of community beliefs and tenets" (99). In this case society provides for women to appeal against male decisions by lodging their objections with the village and the elders' council. When Milenye runs away from her forced marital home only to encounter Dajo's insistence that she returns to her husband, she appeals to this council. Although the council is male dominated, comprising of male elders, uncles and step brothers, it still overrules Dajo, arguing that it was the responsibility of the council to protect her, now that her father is dead. In other words, Milenye's experience is not a simple case of patriarchy against women but of one man's abuse of cultural provisions. Much as the individual abuses of community beliefs and tenets may be far removed from what a society really stands for. I think that in this case, Odaga is arguing against the provisions within the culture and traditions of the Luo that make such abuses possible. One such provision is the elevation of men to positions of power only on the basis of their sex such that women, like Milenye's mother, can become subject to their sons'/step-sons' authority.

Abuses of cultural provisions also mean that simplistic constructions of victimhood in terms of men/women oppositions cannot be sustained. Women too are implicated in the exploitation and abuse of other women. I think it is for this reason that Nnaemeka

(1995) argues that “[t]he ways in which women uphold patriarchal systems and use them to abuse and oppress other women should be feminist concerns” (88-89). In *The Match*, for example, after Milenye is abducted and taken to Ura’s home, the senior wives are hostile towards her. They ridicule and taunt her ceaselessly. They are against her resistance and even keep watch over her to make sure she does not run away. She becomes like a menial slave to the mother-in-law as well as to the senior wife and her children. It is clear that rather than find solidarity in suffering, the co-wives help sustain and uphold the evils of patriarchy. While Nnaemeka argues that women should be held responsible for women-on-women violence, “for conniving and scheming against each other”, for “slandering and backstabbing” each other, Cixous exonerates them arguing that women who abuse other women are themselves victims of men who have taught them to hate themselves as well as other women. In the context of this story, *The Match*, Cixous’ view holds water, to a certain extent, because although there is women-on-women violence, although women help sustain patriarchy, they do this in the attempt to escape or minimise their own misery.

In order to sustain their own independence, they have to sanction and sometimes aid the subjugation of other women. The co-wives, therefore, encourage Milenye to not only accept and endure her misfortune, but to also pray and hope that their husband would marry another wife so that she too might find some freedom. Odaga seems to imply that this is the context in which to understand women’s support of polygamy in Luo land. Milenye’s mother, for example, exhorts her daughters to “always aim at becoming first wives so that [they] would command more respect and exercise some authority in [their] husband’s homes” (Odaga 1991, 16). Taken in the context of most of the narratives, however, interpreting women-on-women violence as simply socialisation by men or polygamy as only supported by women to shield themselves

from male domination and exploitation becomes rather simplistic. I am personally suspicious of arguments that seem to suggest that men can programme women with such finality that for generation upon generation they abuse each other only in order to survive in the male world. I think that kind of approach tends to falsify reality by suggesting that women, of and in themselves, are incapable of evil against other women or even against men. More importantly, I think that kind of approach tends to undermine women's intelligence and capacity for resistance. In other words, African women, and indeed all other women across the world, are human enough to be capable of their own evil without men's assistance, as well as equally intelligent to be able to discern and resist male attempts to pit them against each other.

Wanjiku Kabira (1998) is accurate when she argues that there is no need to indigenise feminism because an "indigenous African feminism already exists". What needs to be done, according to Kabira, is "to bring the African experience into the feminist world". When Kabira made these arguments, she and I were discussing her short stories, published in *Our Secret lives* and *They Have Destroyed the Temple*, in which women are involved in different subversive activities against patriarchy in the context of polygamy. The first one, *My Sister, My Co-wife*, is about a woman who gives one of her children to her barren co-wife in order to rescue the co-wife from the shame and abuse of their husband on the basis of childlessness. Njoroge, the husband, subjects his barren wife, Waceera, to psychological torture by bombarding her with verbal abuse arguing that her barrenness meant he had wasted his dowry. He even refuses to have sex with her, saying that it's a waste of time. Waceera, who previously had loved and treated her co-wife's children as if they were her own, is soon overcome by the pain of insults. Remembering that among her "clansmen you were supposed never to keep something to yourself if it bothered you too much" (Kabira 1991, 28) but "to tell a tree, a mountain, a

stone or a child that would never understand” (28), Waceera creates a river in her imagination and begins to talk to it about her frustrations. Njeri, her co-wife, overhears her and resolves to give her daughter, Nyambura, to Waceera saying:

Nyambura, from now on you are your mother’s child. When you have your second daughter, you will call her Waceera. You are now her daughter and you shall live in her house. I named you my sister and your mother has been my co-wife and sister. I therefore want my sisters to stay together (Kabira 1991, 29).

Nyambura is happy to move to her step-mother’s house. She and the other children insist that their step-mother should consider them as much her children as if they were biologically hers. This act is so liberating to Waceera that she begins singing happy tunes, as opposed to sad ones she had grown to singing; ceases to care whether her husband sleeps with her or not; and grows stronger and happier year after year. No one tells Njoroge what has happened. He remains a puzzled man. Only years later, after Nyambura’s marriage and birth of her second daughter whom she, against custom, names Waceera, does Njoroge understand. For all those years Njoroge had been a de-centred man in his own home by his wives. The two women had used their polygamous status to counter a patriarchal system that measured women’s worth by their fertility.

And it is not only in harmonious polygamous families where women can and do fight against an insensitive male dominated system. Kabira’s second story, also based on a true story, is set within the context of Kenya’s freedom struggle. In this story, *I Cannot Sign*, Wanjiru refuses to sign a death sentence against her co-wife for betraying the freedom struggle. This is in spite of the fact that this very same co-wife has twice nearly had Wanjiru killed. The first time, the co-wife had told the colonial government/home guards that the Mau Mau were sharpening their knives in Wanjiru’s house. With the home guards hot on her heels, Wanjiru is smuggled to her husband’s home in Nairobi, only for her husband to be arrested, tried and acquitted, but

nevertheless detained. In Nairobi, the Mau Mau occasionally visit the compound in which Wanjiru and other women live in search of food. The co-wife again reports her to the home guards who come specifically looking for Wanjiru. Only the other women's refusal to identify her saves Wanjiru from being killed. It is for such instances as this that the Mau Mau send an emissary to ask Wanjiru to authorise and sign for the elimination of her co-wife. Wanjiru refuses to sign, arguing that her co-wife's children would suffer. She says:

Their mother's blood will be on my head. They will suffer. Our husband is already on trial. He might be hanged and the children will be orphans. I could not live with that (Kabira 1991, 35).

Reminded that her co-wife has had many other people killed and that she might have Wanjiru herself killed, she responds:

I know but I do not want to be like her. If we cannot sympathise with her children, who also call me mother, then we have no business fighting for freedom. ...I shall not sign to have my children's mother's blood shed. You can kill me but I will not sign (35).

I am not suggesting that Kabira supports polygamy because it provides for women's resistance or sisterhood. In fact in my interview with her she argued that polygamy is an institution designed to serve men's interests. She argues that polygamy is about power and that women are passive and subservient in this power relation. While not questioning that stance, I am suggesting that women have, however, not just been cowed into accepting the evils of polygamy but that they have at times exploited the institution to undermine man's power. I am also suggesting that polygamy is not always an institution that pits women against women but that in many cases it provides for sisterhood. *I Cannot Sign* shows a woman who refuses to obey men in defence of an inherently evil co-wife, suggesting that women-on-women violence is not necessarily a product of male programming. In my opinion, Kabira's stories, which she says are based on real events, are examples of the complexity of the institution of polygamy as

well as why women-on-women violence cannot simply be blamed on socialisation. If the women in these true life stories were able to engage in resistance, there cannot be a blanket amnesty for women who have abused other women, be they co-wives or otherwise related.

In the words of Obioma Nnaemeka (1997a, 2) Kabira's and her colleagues' narratives on polygamy:

...Speak eloquently to the complexities and ambiguities of African literature, in general, and creative writing by African women, in particular, thereby calling into question some of the existing feminist studies of African literature that insist on straitjacketing the complex web of issues raised in the literary works into oppositional binaries, such as traditional/modern, male/female, agent/victim, when the central arguments of the works and their appeal... rest on the author's insistence on their border crossings, gray areas and the ambiguous interstices of the binaries where woman is both benevolent and malevolent, with powers that are healing and lethal, both traditional and modern, both victim and agent, both goddess and whore...in short just human.

Kabira's third story, *I Refuse to Die*, shows the negative disruptions of Christianity to the institution of polygamy. In this story, the narrator, Nduta wa Muregi, narrates her painful experience of betrayal by both husband and co-wife, not in conjunction but individually. Like *I Cannot Sign* this story is also set within the context of the struggle for Kenya's independence. Muregi, the husband, is accused of having killed two children belonging to a home guard in spite of the fact that the children had died two years previously of natural causes. Surprisingly, Nduta's co-wife, who is a Christian and therefore believes that the Mau Mau is the work of the devil and or the anti-Christ, turns up in the court to falsely testify against their husband. Although Muregi's lawyer manages to prove that the accusations are baseless fabrications, Muregi is still detained. In the absence of their husband, Nduta and her co-wife occupy opposite sides of the struggle: supporting the Mau Mau and the colonial government respectively. Both sides are male dominated. The women's opposition to each other goes beyond ideological

inclinations. As a matter of fact, it's a not question of co-wives in mutual conflict and opposition but the case of a malevolent co-wife planning evil against Nduta. Her malevolence is so phenomenal that she uses her powerful positioning as a home guard to take property from Nduta by force. I am aware that this story, like *I Cannot Sign*, is primarily about the ways in which motherhood is more central to women's lives than wifehood, but I am suggesting that it demonstrates that women are malevolent towards each other without necessarily being so in conjunction with patriarchy. This story is, however, more problematic because, sadly, when Muregi is finally freed from detention, he refuses to associate with Nduta. When she goes to meet him as he is freed, he cold-shoulders her as if she were a stranger to him. It is not clear whether he felt ashamed of her because she was in rags or because she was his second wife. It is equally not clear whether he ever joins his senior wife as she is not mentioned as one of the family members who come to meet him. We can, however, surmise that she was not there because it is inconceivable that Muregi would have been willing to associate closely with a wife who had testified against him. I am therefore inclined to think that the centrality of the usual junior-senior wife animosity does not apply in this case. Nduta is simply caught between a cruel co-wife and a senseless and irresponsible husband.

An even more complicated scenario emerges in Edda Gachukia's *The Ring* (Gachukia 1992). Gachukia fuses many of the forces involved in creating conflict within contemporary polygamous families. Junior-senior wife conflicts, intervention by Christianity, patriarchal values, an unfair foreign-based legal system, and a malevolent senior wife combine to thicken the plot in this narrative. The story is told from Kui's perspective when she realises that her mother, Kanini, is about to be disinherited because the legal system does not recognise her as a *bona fide* wife of her late husband. Jeremiah had married Murugi, his first wife, in church and then later traditionally

married Kanini, his second wife. In such a situation, the legal system only recognises the church wedding as a legitimate marriage. This is in disregard of the fact that when Kanini marries Jeremiah, he and Murugi are said to be estranged, with some even claiming that Murugi had attempted to poison him. In spite of this, and understandably in the context of Christianity, Murugi feels that Kanini is an intruder into her family. She therefore makes every effort to antagonise Kanini not only towards herself but also towards her (Murugi's) children. Jeremiah, though providing a link between the two wives is, for all practical purposes, really only married to Kanini. It is she that he calls to Nairobi when he is unwell and it is in her house that he stays when he visits his rural home. His children, having gone to school and got jobs, build houses for their mothers and at his death, "he was happy that [his wives] were not living in the same compound for he knew of Murugi's animosity toward Kanini" (6).

What emerges from this story is not only Murugi's meanness and animosity, but also her employment of patriarchal standards/tools against her co-wife even when Jeremiah is not bothered about them. She taunts Kanini for her inability to bear sons. At the same time she appeals to a male dominated religious and legal system to disinherit her co-wife even when members of the family, including male ones, are opposed to her actions. This story also makes it extremely difficult to sustain a traditional/modern opposition. The older wife, in terms of marriage as well as age, is the one married according to modern mores while the younger wife is the one married according to tradition. This works against the normal trend where modernity versus tradition usually pits the young against the old. In tradition/modernity conflicts in the context of polygamy, the new wives are usually the hostile ones, as happens in Macgoye's *Victoria*. The problem in this case, according to Gachukia, is the existence, in Kenya, of multiple marriage laws that women activists have failed to address. Kanini is struck by that reality when, as the

story comes to a close, she reads of a case where a woman, who had previously been married customarily, stops a church wedding in which her husband would have married another woman. In a real life situation a similar case was reported in the Kenyan press in the early 2000. The Attorney General, Amos Wako, nullified a multiple marriage in which a polygamous man solemnised his marriage to both of his wives in church. Wako argued that the constitution did not allow such a marriage, even though it is common knowledge that many Kenyans are married to more than one wife, and in disregard of the fact that this man had already been living with these two women. Taken together, I think that these stories demonstrate that African women are aware that polygamy is a complex system. The writers argue that polygamy is an institution which needs to be carefully addressed in the context of contemporary life, because women tend to bear the brunt of its negative consequences.

In conclusion it seems to me that the writers suggest there are two instances in which men/women relationships translate into aggressor/victim respectively: rape and domestic violence. These are the two areas in which women see men as solely responsible and women as merely the victims. However, although women are the victims of domestic violence, men are also seen as victims of a society that demands of them more than they can provide. Society bestows upon men the role of headship of families on the basis of their sex and then demands that men justify that position by becoming the economic providers. Men's frustration in their inability to provide for their families and hence earn the power to rule their homes is manifested in domestic violence. The women imply that if the burden of being the providers were removed from men, and with it their ascendancy to headship positions in the family on the basis of sex, perhaps there would be less domestic violence. The stories represent women who, to paraphrase Wanjiku Kabira (1998), have developed coping mechanisms in the

face of a male dominated society where victimised women have hardly any one to turn to because the legal or cultural institutional systems are largely insensitive to women's victimhood. In the words of Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Matigari* the women are faced with a world whose values are upside down such that the just are punished while criminals are rewarded. Taken as a whole, the stories debunk both the myth of passive African women and that of aggressive and free women. Instead the narratives factor the diverse coping mechanisms adopted by women, such as taking the law into their hands and fighting for their lives in *The Historic Judgement*, *Rosa* and *For My Mother's Sake*; attempting to repress or rationalise their suffering and just live on in *Dreams Come True* and *Healing from Sexual Abuse* or exploiting traditional institutions to create rooms of their own in *I Cannot Sign*, *My Sister My Co-wife* and *The Match*. The authors also separate motherhood from wifhood showing ways in which motherhood gives women cause for living and endurance, with the women sometimes enduring pain and suffering for the sake of children, while wifhood, more often than not, tends to victimise women. Interestingly, and in contradiction to western discourses on polygamy, the women do not seem to think that polygamy is any more oppressive than monogamy. In fact, though the stories do not make comparative studies between monogamy and polygamy, it appears that in polygamy, if women can cultivate sisterhood, there are possibilities of reducing man to a passive participant in the institution. In the context of what issues women consider important to their lives, it is interesting to note that out of the twenty-four narratives, none of them deals with the problem of female circumcision. Indeed, while Ogot and Macgoye mention the practice in their works, none of these writers mention it. I shall focus on this issue in the chapter six while examining fictions by Rebeka Njau and Alice Walker.

Chapter Four

Grace Ogot: The Making of a Liberal Afrocentric Feminist

In the Beijing conference, I think the Kenyan man misunderstood it. We did a jolly good job for the African man, jolly good job, among the communities of the world. We did a jolly good job for them, (Ogot 1998, Interview with the author).

Grace Ogot is undoubtedly one of the most prolific Kenyan women writers and one who, to use Oludhe's words, (1998) has stood the test of time. She was born Grace Emily Akinyi in 1930 in Asembo Kabondo sub-location, Butere, in central Nyanza district of rural western Kenya. She attended Ngiya girls' school and Butere high school before proceeding to Mengo Nursing Training hospital in Uganda where she trained as a nurse. She later worked as an announcer and script writer with the BBC in London from 1955 to 1958. In 1959, she married Bethwell Alan Ogot, now a well known Kenyan historian, with whom she had three children, two boys and a girl. Between 1959 and 1961 Ogot lived in London with her husband who was pursuing his doctoral studies. Ogot can be classified as one of Africa's leading women achievers. This is attested by her accomplishments both as a creative writer and a leader. She was the first anglophone woman writer to be published, with short stories appearing in 1962 and 1964. Her first novel, *The Promised Land* was published in 1966, which was the same year as Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. In 1975, she served as a Kenyan delegate to the general assembly of the United Nations. In the following year, 1976, she was a member of the Kenyan delegation to UNESCO. In the same year, she was the chairperson of the Writers Association of Kenya of which she had been one of the founder members. She first served as a nominated member of parliament in 1983, before being elected to represent Gem after its incumbent member, Horace Owiti, was murdered in 1985. She

was re-elected in 1988 and appointed to the cabinet as an assistant minister for culture and social services. She lost her seat in the 1992 multiparty elections which, in her opinion (Ogot 1998), was because she ran on a KANU¹ ticket, the ruling party, in an opposition dominated western Kenya. She has to her credit three novels: *The Promised Land*, *The Graduate* and *The Strange Bride*; plus three volumes of short stories: *The Other Woman*, *The Island of Tears* and *The Land Without Thunder*. Her major concerns in her writing include marriage and family relationships, with special reference to wife/husband relationships. She is also interested in the marginalisation of women in the public domain contrary to provisions for their involvement within the traditional structures of Luo society. In a 1979 interview with Lindfors (1979) she attributes her emergence as a writer to traditional stories narrated to her by her grandmother. She also argues that her interest in the relationship and tensions between traditional medicine and modern medicine is inspired by her training as a nurse.

Ogot's literary career spans almost as long a period as that of Kenya's most well known male writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. It is surprising that Ogot is not nearly as well known. A simple comparison indicates that between 1962 and 1983, Ogot and Ngugi were nearly equally prolific in terms of writing. When Ogot was getting her short stories published between 1962 and 1964, Ngugi had his play, *The Black Hermit* performed in 1962, while his second novel, though the first to be published, *Weep not Child*, came out in 1964. His first novel, *The River Between*, was published in 1965. The following year, Ogot published her longest novel, *The Promised Land*. One of Ngugi's most complex works of art to date, *A Grain of Wheat*, was published in 1967 followed closely the following year by the publication of *The Black Hermit*. During that year, 1968, Ogot also had her collection of short stories, *The Land Without Thunder*, published. There then follow eight years of creative silence on Ogot's part, during which Ngugi produces

¹ The ruling party, Kenya African National Union

his collection of essays, *Homecoming* in 1972 and a collection of short stories, *Secret Lives* in 1975. In 1976 Ogot reappeared on the scene with a collection of short stories entitled *The Other Woman*. In the same year Ngugi teamed up with Ngugi wa Mirii to script and publish a play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. 1977 saw him publish his last novel in the English language, *The Devil on the Cross*, but also marked the beginning of his writing career in Gikuyu with his involvement in the writing of *Ngahika Ndenda*, later to be translated as *I Will Marry When I Want*. Three years later, when Ngugi's *Caitani Mutharabaini (Devil on the Cross)* was published, Ogot also came up with her only post-colonial novel, *The Graduate*, and also a collection of short stories, *The Island of Tears*. There was thereafter a three year's silence on Ogot's part till 1983 when she published a novella in Dholuo entitled *Miaha*, later to be translated as *The Strange Bride* in 1989. During that period Ngugi continued to share his ideas in a collection of essays *Writers in Politics: Essays* (1981) and *Barrel of a Pen : Resistance to Repression in Neo-colonial Kenya* (1983). To date, Ogot has not produced anything else creative, though she did tell me (Ogot, 1998) that she has a novel, *A Call At Midnight*, in waiting. Ngugi has continued being productive with such publications as *Bathitora ya Njamba Nene* (1984), *Decolonising the mind : the Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), *Matigari* (1987), *Moving the Centre : the Struggle for Cultural Freedoms* (1993), *Penpoints, Gunpoints, and Dreams : Towards a Critical Theory of the Arts and the State in Africa* (1998) and I understand that he has a novel, *Murogi wa Kagogo*, about to be published.

While I think it is naïve and politically cheap to insist that Ngugi and Ogot are accorded equal status in the attempt to merely even scores between men and women, for there are other equally prolific male writers in Kenya and Africa in general who have not got as much attention as Ngugi, I still think there is a point to be made about Ogot's having

got a raw deal in terms of critical attention. The little attention that Ogot has received has been, in most cases, grossly unfair or largely inaccurate. We have, in the first instance, and especially in the early days, criticism espoused by western male critics such as David Cook (1969) who saw Ogot's *The Promised Land* as naïve and bizarre, Charles Larson whom Stratton (1994) quotes as having described the novel as "one of the most disappointing African novels in a long time" (60) or Brown (1981) who described Ogot as a writer who "relies on uninspired rather pedestrian style and her characters are usually too wooden or undeveloped to be capable of convincing emotional responses" (26). I shall be arguing in this chapter that this kind of criticism is inspired by Eurocentric conceptions of what should constitute a good novel and/or its realism. When those expectations are not met, the novel in question is seen as naïve, bizarre and disappointing. Secondly we have the kind of criticism led by African male critics who expect Ogot not to undermine what Stratton calls the Manichean allegory of gender as constructed in African social systems and conventions. An example is Achufusi (1991) who accuses Ogot of being in support of Euro-Christian behaviour. In fact, as shall become evident in the course of this chapter, Ogot's rejection of Western morality is as intense, if not more so, as Ngugi's.

Thirdly there are those who Stratton has identified as arguing for western feminism as universal and ideal. One such critic, Maryse Conde, whom Stratton (1994) quotes, appreciates Ogot's skills as a writer but accuses her, paradoxically, of being so "...blinded by her respect for the European codes of behaviour, so confused as to the place of her traditional beliefs that her female characters possess neither coherence nor credibility"... (61) Conde does not seem to think that Ogot would score any marks as an advocate of women's rights, let alone as a feminist. She says of Ogot:

She may believe that she is an emancipated woman who reads books but what she offers her fellow-countrywomen is a dangerous picture of alienation and

enslavement. One feels tempted to advise her to join some Women's Lib. movement to see how European females question the code of values and behaviour imposed upon them and to replace her Bible with Germaine Greer's book (quoted in Stratton 1994, 61).

Ogot may find some comfort that Greer (1999) herself has now suggested that white feminists should pay attention to cultures other than theirs and how these may influence different interpretations, by women, of what may constitute their freedom and or liberation. Germain Greer has, interestingly, a whole chapter that is largely an apologia for female circumcision that Ogot, through Jedidah in *The Other Woman*, nevertheless calls an idea that stinks. However, Ogot is careful to demonstrate that female circumcision is, in spite of her prejudices against the ritual, practised and valued in many communities in Kenya. This issue will be dealt with more comprehensively in chapter six.

Fourthly and happily there are others, like Stratton herself, who at least approach Ogot from a positive perspective. Stratton falls into a class of feminist critics who reject male sexist readings of Ogot as well as Maryse Conde's type of western feminist analysis. She treats Ogot as a feminist in her own right and proceeds to demonstrate how Ogot achieves her feminist goals by discrediting the male subject through the inversion/reversal of male sexual allegories where male becomes bad/object while the female becomes good/subject. In a way this is a realistic variation of Frank's approach (1987) when she argues that "the feminist novel in Africa is not only alive and well, it is in general more radical, even more militant than its western counterpart" (15). Frank's argument is that African women writers are trying to interrogate poor male representations of women. She proceeds to suggest that the African women writers she has studied are advocating a world without men. In the same vein, Stratton reads Ogot's *The Promised Land* as an interrogation of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and then

concludes that in Ogot's fiction men fall apart to make room for women. Stratton argues that Ogot's fiction insinuates that the only good man is a dead one since Ogot only celebrates dead men, such as Tom Mboya in *The Island of Tears*. Though Stratton's reading is broad, informative and incisive, it is still Eurocentric and inaccurate in so far as it suggests that Ogot posits men against women and vice-versa.

There is a fifth and positive reading, a feminist one, which is close to the approach taken in this chapter. This is the one within which Chukukere (1994, 1995) operates. She (1994) categorises Ogot as a "realistic feminist" (107) arguing that Ogot's vision is structured within the realisation that "no matter how fierce a battle is waged by protagonists of militant feminist movement (of European tradition) the fact still remains that for a majority of African societies, social and moral values such as espoused by the author's short stories hold sway" (107). She then concludes that:

Grace Ogot may not belong to the overt militant tradition of western and African feminism; she, however, presents alternatives for female autonomy which take into account the need for continued interaction between the sexes. This standpoint, founded upon a humanistic order, is morally superior to the self-annihilating concerns of militant feminism and makes it possible to categorise her as a realistic feminist (112).

What emerges from this overview is that Ogot has been subjected to such diverse critical evaluations that some contradict one another. Conde's and Achufusi's suggestions that Ogot is blinded by her admiration of western values are difficult to reconcile with Chukukere's and even, to a certain extent, Stratton's postulations that Ogot actually repudiates western value systems. This study suggests that Ogot, in almost all her creative fiction operates on two levels: as an advocate of women's rights and hence feminism, and as a defender of African traditions and hence Afrocentricity. I suggest, in my analysis of her novels, that she is a liberal feminist because she advocates gradual change in the prevailing social structures while at the same time

showing that women can work with and within certain patriarchal institutions for their own good. Using the short stories, I suggest that Ogot's main object of criticism is not tradition but men who pay lip service to them but fail to uphold those same customs they purport to support. She argues that men's failure to uphold tradition has led to a major source of oppression for Luo/African women.

In order to appreciate the seriousness with which Ogot approaches her fiction we must pay close attention to the context in which she writes. Her writings reflect her rural upbringing, her training as a nurse, and most importantly, her Luo culture. Most historians hold that the Luos migrated to their present home in western Kenya from the Sudan. Linguistic and cultural similarities with other Nilotic groups in Sudan, Uganda and Tanzania are generally accepted by historians as indicative of a north south migration by the Luo. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to go into the details and controversies surrounding that migration. A more elaborate discussion of this issue can be found in Ochola-Ayayo (1976), Ogot (1967), and Hague (1974). In this chapter I deliberately foreground those features of Luo community and culture that bear direct relevance to Ogot's fiction. The Luo are known as a community whose pride in their culture and willingness to defend it is paralleled by very few communities in Kenya. This fishing community of western Kenya is especially known for its veneration of the aged and the dead, the centrality of dreams in the ordering of the people's daily lives, and their love for music and poetry among other things. Naming of children for example, though determined by such things as gender, twins, time of the day, seasons or major events, also hinges on dreams. The parents will wait till an old man/woman is visited by a dead relative in a dream demanding to be named. Naming is so important in Luo-land that they have a genre of oral literature centring around names. It is known as "Pakruok" in which participants, to the accompaniment of music, use praise names to

describe themselves or give money to oral performers to sing their praises. An example of this performance takes place in *The Promised Land*.

In terms of veneration of the dead, mourning among the Luo includes feasting, which could take anything from a few days or to several weeks, shaving of relatives, lighting of ceremonial fires, otherwise known as *maghenga*, insistence on specific sites for burials such as certain spots in the homestead, possible involvement of professional mourners, and other ceremonies which, it is believed if not carried out will lead to the dead coming to haunt the living. In recent times Luo leaders and scholars have been engaged in debates over such cultural issues as whether when a Luo dies away from his/her rural home the body must be transported to the rural village, whether wife inheritance should continue, and whether male circumcision should be introduced in an attempt to curb or slow down the spread of AIDS (Ochieng 1999, Omari 1999, Onywa 1999). Mr Raila Odinga, the leader of the Luo dominated National Democratic Party (NDP) is quoted by Omari (1999) as having said that Luos living in Nairobi spend, on average, ten million shillings per month transporting dead relatives for burial in the villages. The central problem is the distinction that Luos make between the concepts of home and a house. Cohen and Adhiambo (1992) reveal that for Luos, home is to be understood only in the context of ancestral origin. If a Luo builds a house away from his ancestral village, irrespective of how long he lives there with his family, that is only a house. When he dies he must be transported to his ancestral village for burial. I discuss this concept in greater detail in chapter five while investigating Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's critical examination of the concept with specific reference to women. Ogot's writings reflect Luo culture because they borrow heavily from Luo oral literature. This is especially so in her short stories, but also significantly in her novella, *The Strange Bride*, and to a certain extent in her first novel, *The Promised Land*.

It is important that we pay particular attention to and take seriously Luo culture because only then can we begin to understand the “realism” of Ogot’s fiction. In an interview with Bernth Lindfors (1979) for example, Ogot argued that traditional medicine/witchcraft is real and plausible for those to whom it effects remedies for their problems just as Christianity and modern science is to others. In response to Lindfors’ query about why she had referred to *The Promised Land*, a novel that seems to elevate witchcraft/traditional medicine above modern medicine, as a “true fantasy”, she had this to say:

The hero, Ochola, and his family are people living in our generation. Ochola’s home is in Seme in Maseno division. It is a family that still lives today, a family that we know. They migrated in this century to Tanzania and they are back. They are people we can see and talk to. That is why we say it is a true fantasy (Lindfors 1979, 61).

In the same interview, she defends the realism of the rather unusual story of Nyamgondho of *The Fisherman*. Nyamgondho fishes out an old woman from the lake who, in return for Nyamgondho’s kindness, gives him great wealth. When he later mistreats her, she returns to the lake together with the wealth in the form of cattle. My argument here is that some of the so-called fantastical issues in Ogot’s fiction are things that Ogot and her people take seriously. I am convinced that we cannot fully appreciate Ogot’s fiction and her contribution to the gender equality debate unless we approach it with as much seriousness as she does.

Although I have begun with Ogot’s longer works, I think the proper starting point for a discussion of Ogot’s work may be the short story *Allan Mjomba* that appears in her 1980 collection of short stories titled *The Island of Tears*. This is for two reasons: 1) this story, told as a narrative of a real life experience, demonstrates, as argued above, just how seriously Ogot takes certain happenings that some of her critics have dismissed as

mere fantasy and; 2) Ogot also uses this story to let us know that besides the living and the dead (the theme of this particular story), her other themes include nuns and prostitutes, and wealth and poverty. In the rest of this chapter I demonstrate how Ogot uses these themes to interrogate male/female relationships within both traditional and modern patriarchal social structures. In *Allan Mjomba* Ogot recounts the "fantastic" experiences of a woman, Joan, and her dead husband. Joan bursts into tears after hearing Ogot assert, in a lecture delivered at Limuru, that the dead speak, are quite close to the living and that they love and care for them. She is overcome with emotions because Ogot affirms, for her, that her experience of visitation by her husband in dreams was real and not indicative of insanity as her relatives had insisted. Later, Joan and Ogot meet again as Kenyan delegates to United Nations General Assembly in New York where Joan reveals that her dead husband, Allan Mjomba, had visited her in her dreams and told her to name her unborn son after him and thereafter on several occasions to remind her of things she might have forgotten or to warn her of impending dangers. The story asserts that the living and the dead can and do interact. It can be seen as Ogot's way of locating the phenomenon outside Luo land, for Joan is from Kenya's coast, a way of giving the phenomenon of the interaction between the living and the dead further credence. In essence the story seeks to blur the boundaries between the living and the dead; a constant theme in Ogot's literature. By identifying herself by name as the narrator and establishing the historicity of the story in terms of time, 1975, and space, New York, where Ogot was indeed a Kenyan delegate to the United Nations Assembly, she seems at pains to prove that there is more to this story than fiction. In the story, Joan Mjomba had met Ogot in May 1975 at Limuru where Ogot had indeed given a lecture on one of her pet topics: the dying and the dead. This story is not only important in shedding light on Ogot's topics and the significance she attaches to spirituality among the Luo, but also serves to underline the centrality of the surreal to women's

empowerment as demonstrated in chapter two and made more explicit in my analysis of Ogot's other works such as *The Strange Bride*, "The Sacrifice", and "The fisherman" among others in the latter part of this thesis.

Wealth and property, and how the desire for them drives men to silence and sideline women among the Luo to the detriment of everyone, is the theme that takes centre stage in Ogot's first novel. *The Promised Land* (1966), by far Grace Ogot's most complex work of art, as shall become clear in this study, has received the harshest criticism of all her creative writing. In my opinion this was especially unfortunate in the early days, as it may have discouraged Ogot in her endeavour to engage in creative writing. It may be instructive that it took her fourteen years to publish her next novel, *The Graduate* (1980). The message and structure of *The Promised Land* is as powerfully and dextrously delivered as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Stratton is convincing when she argues that the novel received negative criticism not because its "...plot is improbable or pointless but that the narrative does not conform to the characteristics of the conventional male narrative" (1994, 61). In this story, the recently married Ochola, the main protagonist in the novel, decides to relocate from his homeland, Seme, to Musoma in Tanganyika, which in this novel is supposed to be the promised land, in the hope of acquiring riches and fame. This is in defiance of protests from his relatives, his old and sickly father in particular, and most prominently his wife, Nyapol. In Tanganyika he is received well by Oketch and other Luos living there who help him to establish himself as a wealthy landowner. He makes the mistake of building his home near an evil Nyamwezi medicine man who is intensely jealous of successful Luos. Ochola provokes further antagonism when he attempts a courtesy visit to the Nyamwezi medicine man's home. The medicineman treats him most discourteously. Instead of sharing that information with his wife, Ochola decides to keep it to himself arguing that women can

be panicky. His wife nevertheless finds out about the visit from Aziza, a woman that the old medicine man holds as more of a prisoner than a wife, and asks him to relocate to a spot further away from the old man. He is defiant. He then infuriates the old man by killing his cat (actually the cat is killed by Ochola's dog) that had come to eat Ochola's chicken. The old man plants medicine in his house and Ochola is plagued by a strange disease that makes him grow thorn-like warts that make him look like a human porcupine. Magungu, a medicine man from his native land, saves him from this ordeal and then forces him to return to his homeland practically empty handed.

In this novel Ogot is challenging three things: the social construction of manhood; the idea of running away from one's roots or traditions, and the male tendency to silence women in society, especially when it comes to wealth-making and property appropriation. In Ochola, Ogot suggests that men's psyche has been socially programmed to make them see themselves as the sole wealth-makers. This leads to the decentralisation of women, in terms of decision making, in regard to that enterprise. The driving force behind Ochola's stubborn refusal to listen to his wife and family members is his desire to be imbued with "...the spirit of a man ...so that [he] may work hard and be prosperous" (69).

Ochola's greatest flaw is his attempt to sustain a conventional masculine identity. In an interview with the author, Ogot (1998) says that in Luo culture it is incumbent upon men, if and when they marry, to create and provide wealth for the wife or wives and children. She suggested that one of the reasons why polygamy is dwindling in Luo land is because of the economy. This is because "...if you marry them [wives] you have to feed them among the Luo community, and look after them, educate all the children and equally give them wealth...." It is in keeping with this tradition that Ochola wants to be

left alone to be the man in his house. In his words, “I am a married man now...It is high time I was given the chance to plan my own future and to provide for my family. Father should agree to give me this chance” (31-32).

In Ochola’s view, that vision of conventional masculine identity also entails other responsibilities. One of them is that the husband should be able to control and silence his wife. He spends the first few days of his marriage trying to make Nyapol submit to his authority. He wants her to learn to listen to him in silence and to cease pointing at him with her fingers. A woman to him is like a weapon in a man’s hands. He therefore compares his wife to a spear in the hands of a hunter or an axe in the hands of one going to cut wood. In other words she should be at his service to help accomplish tasks that he has set his heart on. Although Ochola desires to create wealth so passionately in order to provide for Nyapol, his ignoring her stand on the matter reduces her to an unwilling participant in the wealth-making enterprise.

A second role envisaged by Ochola is the ability to make infallible decisions. He makes three wrong decisions, all of which are challenged by his wife, and one of them by his relatives. He ignores them in the attempt to assert himself as an independent man who makes infallible decisions. Throughout the text, Ogot shows us Ochola desperately making futile attempts to sustain this traditional masculine identity. Grace Ogot systematically deconstructs the veracity of this approach to gender relations. This leads to a third role envisaged by Ochola: that of being the pillar and strength of the family and, by extension, society as a whole. It is in trying to sustain this image that Ochola will not allow Nyapol to “... trace a sign of doubt or anxiety in his face” (64), finds it “...embarrassing to tremble openly when a woman was looking on” (93), and will not admit that his experience of wild animals had bothered him lest he betrays the “... the

secret of manhood in the eyes of a woman” (84). By getting behind the masks and showing us the real man, Ogot shows this strong-brave-man image as a facade.

Ogot, though attacking autocratic strands of patriarchy, does not call for the jettisoning of the ethic of man as the head and provider for his family. What she is critical of is the idea of privileging that ethic, especially when its driving force is economics, to the detriment of democracy within the home and the emotional needs of wives and children. By the end of the novel Ochola is reduced to weeping unashamedly in front of his wife. This is a prospect that he could not have envisioned at the beginning of the novel. It takes Magungu’s intervention to refocus Ochola on what should have always been at the centre of his plans, action and ambitions, his life, wife and children. Ogot is suggesting that in the pursuit of wealth men forget what really matters, their wives and children. Unlike men, women are shown to subscribe to the ethic of putting one’s family first, especially the nuclear family. When the women visit Ochola in Tanganyika they are so impressed with the land that they want to stay, but they quickly change their minds when reminded of their husbands and children. “Ocholan” patriarchy, which Ogot disapproves of, means pursuing wealth for one’s family irrespective of what that family thinks of that enterprise. This is different from “Jacoyan” patriarchy, which Ogot approves of, as shall become clear in my analysis of *The Graduate*, and which means pursuing wealth for and with the agreement of the family.

The failure by some critics, such as Stratton (1994), to appreciate Ogot’s validation of African culture and traditions lies in their inability to recognise Ochola’s double migration, spatial-economic and spatial-cultural. The migration is spatial because it involves actual geographic relocation but is also both economic and cultural. It is economic because better material prospects are the sole motivator behind Ochola’s

decision to relocate. Culture is of course ingrained in a people's daily dealings with their geographical, social and economic environment, and therefore Ochola's relocation inevitably puts him in a strange cultural environment. Although the Luos in Tanganyika try to keep their culture alive, the environment is just not conducive and they find themselves inevitably in conflict with alien cultural forces.

What is critical to our understanding of Ogot's position is a realisation that Ochola's choice is not an economic but a cultural blunder. Economically the decision to migrate more than pays off. Nyapol, who had been sceptical about both the spatial-economic and spatial-cultural migration, acknowledges that the economic migration had succeeded.

While moving into a new permanent house:

Nyapol realised how lucky she was. Very few women in her age group lived in a beautiful house like this. In fact she felt it was not wrong to think that she was the luckiest woman in the world, although she knew it would be wrong to boast or to express her secret feelings to others. *Bad spirits lived everywhere and they could do much harm* (85) (emphasis mine).

The last line is highlighted for two reasons. First, it indicates that Nyapol is not the revolutionary anti-traditionalist that some critics, such as Stratton, would like us to believe she is. Much as she questions some oppressive traditional structures, she is not, as Stratton says, disassociated from traditions. Stratton gives the example of Nyapol's suggestion that she be allowed to spend a first night in their new house, contrary to Luo tradition, with her husband. She ignores the paragraph that follows Ochola's reprimand:

Nyapol saw the point and apologised. Like the God of Father Ellis, the ancestors' hands did not spare anybody who broke the law of society. Her mother had told her so on many occasions (81).

This brings me to the second reason for highlighting the line in the previous quote. The truth of that statement is affirmed in Ochola's experience that is in turn a validation of

Nyapol's fears. When Ochola's disease makes him run off into the forest, we are told that for Nyapol:

All the emotional strains and hidden fears of many months had come into the open. She now had no doubt that to leave one's motherland to go and live as a stranger amongst strange people was a sin in the eyes of the ancestors (131).

In reading *The Promised Land*, spatial-cultural migration and the attendant consequences must be at the centre of its analysis. It is different from the cultural migration, figuratively speaking, enacted by Abiero's (Ochola's younger brother's) appropriation of Christianity. Cultural migration, defined by imbibing western systems of thought such as Christianity, in Ogot's view, never runs too deep. The superficial nature of such migration is manifested in nurse Elizabeth's insistence that in spite of being Christian, she still knew, as an African, that "...there are bad spirits that cause disease or a bad eye that causes death" (Ogot 1968, 171). Abiero himself is also a good example. Faced with the frustrations of not being able to find Ochola it is not to Christ he turns to but the God of Ramogi whose icon is not the cross but the sun. Mary, the mother of Christ, is not the mediator for him, but his own mother who appears to him in a dream.

Ochola, whose migration is spatial-cultural becomes, to use Nyapol's insinuations "...a shallow-minded person without roots" (47). From the very beginning, it is made clear that "Ochola was going against tradition in leaving his home" and that "[I]f his dead mother was as displeased as his relatives, God would not bless them at all" (39). Nyapol, therefore, in opposing Ochola's move is not opposing patriarchy as an institution, but is actually in sympathy with it. Indeed when the family members gather to discuss what they consider Ochola's grave mistake, the seating arrangement tells it all.

The men sat in front of Owiti's hut. Some were smoking, others were chewing tobacco. The women sat in front of Ayo's hut, a short distance from the old man's, where they could hear the proceedings (29).

It is clear that the women are at the margins of the centre of this discourse. The men at the centre think that Ochola's decision is a mad one. In *The Promised Land* we are not up against male conspiracy against women as in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* or Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. We are up against one man's mad decision to leave the comforts of home to seek wealth in a strange country, among strange people, in contradiction to tradition and passionate appeals by his wife. Constantly in the novel we are reminded that Nyapol wants to return home to Seme whose cultural environment she understands and can control, or where at least she can find solidarity amongst her women-folk to deal with any occurrence. Seme, however, is not a land of gender bliss but the place where she is taught to be silent when men are speaking and not to point at them with her fingers even if she is angry. Their return to Seme therefore cannot be read as the triumph of sexual politics but as the triumph of culture. It marks the triumph of Luo traditional medicine above modern medicine, Christianity and Nyamwezi evil medicine.

This does not mean that Ogot gives every traditional practice in Luo land a clean bill of health. In the character of Nyapol, Grace Ogot challenges the structures that silence women in Luo culture. It is apparent that women, in Luo culture, are expected to submissively endure/indulge the caprices of their husbands. Nyapol, being newly married, has no chance of acting in contradiction to her husband's wishes, but she is not the silent, passive and submissive traditional woman that Ochola seems to have expected. Contrary to Ochola's idea of a model wife, Nyapol not only talks back to her husband but also threatens him with her fingers in a way "she had been told never to do

to a husband even when she was annoyed” (26). She consistently challenges Ochola’s decisions making him feel “...silly, idiotic, rootless, and shallow minded” (47).

In the end it is her predictions rather than Ochola’s that prove right. Her first objection is in regard to Ochola’s migration from Seme and his people to Tanganyika. She has a three pronged argument: that Tanganyika, unlike Seme, would be a land of strange people; that it would be unwise to leave Ochola’s old father alone; and that the sole driving force behind Ochola’s migration was greed as they already had enough land to work on in Seme. Although Tanganyika at first appears a real Canaan for him, Ochola’s encounter with the evil medicine man from the Nyamwezi, only referred to as the ‘old man’ in the story, would have cost him his life were it not for the intervention of Magungu, the good medicine man from Kanyada in South Nyanza, with his more powerful concoctions and rituals. Had Ochola listened to Nyapol’s second objection, that they should not stay in the lonely place near the old man’s house but rather move to Oketch’s village, he perhaps would have saved himself a lot of trouble. Ochola has no one to blame except himself for his misfortunes because he fails to heed a third proposition by Nyapol, that they move from near the old man’s place and build another house across the river, far away from him. I do not think it would be stretching the imagination to say that Ochola’s misfortunes proceed directly from his silencing of Nyapol’s voice. The key point is that women must not only be allowed to speak but they must also be listened to and their ideas acted upon.

In the next novel that I deal with in this chapter, Ogot demonstrates the immense potential for good that lies in listening to women. *The Strange Bride* (1983) is one of Ogot’s less well known novels. There could be several reasons for this neglect. One possibility is the fact that the novella was first published in Dholuo and hence remained

largely inaccessible till it was translated into English by Okoth Okombo in 1988. But that is not the only reason as Stratton (1994) gives it only fleeting attention, and Chukukere (1994, 1995) does not even mention the novel in spite of the fact that both critics are writing more than six years after its translation. I would suggest that another reason for this neglect is the fact that the story defies their classification and theoretical approaches. While Chukukere classifies Ogot as a realistic feminist, this novel has more fantasy than realism. While Stratton wants to treat Ogot as engaging in the twin process of discrediting males and reversing stereotypical female roles, this novella affirms as well as discredits traditional constructions of men and women. The novella is not even wholly Ogot's creation. It is based on a traditional oral narrative, hence defying the typical eurocentric feminist inscription of African oral narratives as portraying women negatively.

The story is set in distant ancestral days when the Luo god, Were Nyakalaga, lived on earth with his people. It gets fantastic when it reveals that in those days the Luos did not have to cultivate their land because Nyakalaga had given them a metallic hoe "that would do all the cultivation they needed as long as they kept god's commandments governing the use of that hoe" (1). It is this order that Nyawir, the heroine of the novella, disrupts by taking over responsibility from Lwak, her mother-in-law and, against tradition and instruction by her mother-in-law, striking the ground with the metal headed hoe. Tradition laid the responsibility of taking the metal hoe to the farms on Lwak, whose responsibility was to merely place it on the farm where Nyakalaga would make the hoe cultivate the land on behalf of the Luo community. Nyawir, out of curiosity, and by clever application of timing, persistence and insistence, manages to make Lwak delegate that responsibility to her. Instead of leaving the hoe in the farms as instructed she, against tradition, attempts to dig with it. This action is disruptive as the

hoe loses its divine touch and cannot cultivate on its own any more. At the same time, this action leads to a strained relationship between the god and the people.

Before reading the presence or absence of feminism into this story there are hurdles that must be overcome. This narrative is first and foremost a traditional story and therefore we need to investigate how far Ogot can take credit for it. In her interview with me she (1998) suggested that although she may have added a little bit of flesh here and there, she remained largely faithful to the skeleton of the story in its traditional form. It is my submission, however, that it can be read as Ogot's story for several reasons. First its oral background suggests that a woman might have created it since, as Chukukere informs us (1995, 219), story telling was, in traditional Africa, mainly a female domain. Ogot, having created so many other short stories, has as much right to claim ownership of the story as any other woman narrator in Luo land.

Secondly, since it is Ogot who is first, among the Luos, to attempt to reconstruct or (re)inscribe this narrative in literary form, this suggests that the events in it sufficiently moved her to make her take time to capture it in writing. Thirdly and most crucially is the fact that the narrative's themes and ideas are consistent with Ogot's ideas as represented in her other writings. Indeed in order to fully appreciate the seriousness that Ogot attaches to this narrative, one has to read it against or alongside *Allan Mjomba*, *The Rain Came*, *The Promised Land*, and to a certain extent *The Wayward Father*, *The Other Woman* and the *The Ivory Trinket*. Given the strength of character ascribed to women protagonists in this narrative, I propose to read this story as a women's version of social transformation in Luo-land to which Ogot subscribes. It develops, in my view, Ogot's theme in *The Promised Land* of the need to listen to women.

The relationship between *The Promised Land* and *The Strange Bride* may not be very obvious but it is significantly central to Ogot's vision about women in society. The two stories can be seen as antithetical. Ochola ends up in tragedy and ruin because he does not listen to his wife. Owiny ends up in triumph and riches because he listens to his wife and stands by her, for better or worse. To Ochola wealth comes before family while to Owiny family comes first. Nyapol is, by and large, a traditional and conservative woman who, though unwillingly, follows her husband wherever he goes until it becomes practically impossible to follow him. Nyawir, though accepting her husband as the head of her house, is nevertheless more the leader than the led. On the eve of the fateful day, it is Nyawir who initiates and steers the debate on the role of the metal-headed hoe. It is true that she employs stereotypical female techniques such as threats, sulking and nagging, but she does manage to get the information she wants from Owiny. When they are banished, Nyawir appeals to traditional values, by deriding Owiny as a cowardly woman, and hence manages to force Owiny to gather the courage to ask his father for an axe for use in cutting trees in the forest. As they leave the community, Nyawir leads the way rather than follows. Even in their banishment, on their first night in the forest, it is Nyawir who leads the discussion. While Owiny snores away the night, Nyawir thinks throughout the night. When we consider that in the final analysis it is her view that prevails and that Owiny's fortune is contingent upon the banishment and the axe, then Nyawir's leadership becomes complete. In both of the narratives, however, the message is ultimately the same: if men do not listen to women, failure or disaster will follow. If on the other hand they listen to women and act on the women's propositions fortune will follow.

Ogot's inscription of women as wiser than men is so skilfully and ingeniously structured in this story that in spite of the possible multiple interpretations of the text,

there are no two ways of reading this particular point. Nyawir's actions for example, like Eve and the forbidden fruit in the Bible, have dual and paradoxical significance: curse and blessing. If we think of the increase in wealth and knowledge that her action brings, then it is a blessing. If we think of the fact that now the people of Got Owaga are less intimate with their god and that they have to live by the sweat of their brows as opposed to god cultivating for them, then it is a curse. Either way, the credit or the blame is in favour of ascribing significance to women's voices.

On the one hand, if Nyawir brings a curse upon her community, she cannot bear that blame alone. First, Lwak must shoulder the blame for failing in her duties, for it was her responsibility to take the hoe to the farms, and also for failing to exercise her powers, as Were Ochak's senior wife, over her daughter-in-law. Secondly, Owiny is not without guilt, for it is he who insists on marrying a girl that he hardly knows and also contravenes traditions by discussing "... a subject that was sacred in Got Owaga" (71). Were Ochak, however, takes the bulk of the blame because the power to either allow or disallow the marriage between Owiny and Nyawir rested with him. He yields to Owiny's bachelorhood threats too easily and too quickly. He ignores his own premonitions. Most poignantly, though, he refuses to listen to his wife's constant warnings against the marriage. If he had not ignored, silenced or dismissed Lwak's voiced fears, then the curse would not have come upon the community.

On the other hand, we may view the consequences of Nyawir's actions as a blessing because they lead to a great increase in wealth and knowledge. They also save the community from having to be saddled with Opii's leadership, a man who lacked wisdom, was poor at negotiations, bad tempered and antagonised people. Two people take credit for the turn of events here, Nyawir and Owiny. Nyawir's strength lies in her

being forceful, articulate and insatiable in her quest for knowledge. The key point is that she speaks as opposed to being silent or allowing herself to be intimidated or silenced. Owiny's contribution lies in his reaction to his wife's utterances. Although some of them are shocking to him, being a man and given to tradition and custom, he nevertheless puts his wife above tradition and masculinity. Although his fellow men accuse him of having succumbed to Nyawir's witchcraft and allowing himself to be controlled by her, he still stands by his wife. This is what the men tell him:

Owiny this woman has put you under,
 A powerful spell. She has brought,
 Bad magic from her place.
 She has robbed you of your mind.
 This woman is a witch; and if you,
 Refuse to let us kill her, we can
 Even kill the two of you together (97).

He responds to them, a few pages later, by arguing that any one killing Nyawir would be like someone scooping his eyes out. When he finds great wealth in the underworld, into which he had slipped while trying to rescue the hoe that had broken and fallen into a hole, while he was cutting wood to build a house for Nyawir, there is a sense of just payment for a job well done in defence of his wife. When he comes back from the underworld the people recognise his wealth and contribution to society and make him chief even though that position should have, legitimately and according to custom, gone to his elder brother Opii. It is necessary to add that although Owiny's rise to power is in a real sense decreed by Were Nyakalaga, his acquired wealth plays a great part in his being accepted as leader by the people. The message from Ogot is that because Owiny listens to and stands by his wife, he finds both leadership and great wealth. Again Ogot makes her point: men must learn to listen to their women and specifically, in this context, their wives.

It is true, as Stratton says, that Ogot is in this story deconstructing the male tendency to view women as outside history. It is, however, inaccurate to posit that she, at the same time, represents women as outside or even in opposition to tradition and customs. The first hindrance to such a position is raised by considerations of the extent to which Nyawir's action constitutes wilful opposition to a cultural system. There is no doubt that she is a strong willed, obstinate, intelligent and independent woman, but there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that she was in full cognisance of the possible consequences of her attempt to dig with the metal headed hoe. Hers is not a well-planned and executed plan but rather an impulsive reaction to a temptation. Although by digging she transgresses and sets in motion fundamental social changes, at no time is that act interpreted positively by any character or even by the narrative voice of the story. Constantly in the course of the narrative, Nyawir accedes that her action was wrong but that her commitment to change was nevertheless consistent with the community's world-view. On this account she remains unrepentant, and that, in my opinion, is her strength from an Afrocentric feminist perspective. She says:

...I agree that I sinned and now I've brought a big problem for Were Ochak, my father-in-law, and Lwak, my mother-in-law. But look, Owiny, the people of Got Owaga have a saying that generations replace one another in the enjoyment of life. *In my own mind that saying means there must be change in the world.* Meaning that when our elders' days are finished and they die, then those who are born after them become elders and take their places; and the youth also go the various ways of growth until they become adults and assume leadership.

Now if those growing children only follow the practices of their forefathers, without bringing change, how can the world develop, if man does not use the intelligence which Were Nyakalaga gave him. Didn't Were Nyakalaga give man intelligence and strength for his own good? (123) (emphasis mine).

Here Nyawir is arguing that change is not inconsistent with the ways and norms of the tribe. She is asserting that their god has already empowered them with brains with which to conceptualise ways and means of improving their lives. Here Ogot is making a case for a dynamic and revolutionary traditional and customary system as opposed to a

closed one that the male dominated administrative hierarchy wants to maintain. We are therefore not meant to read Nyawir's disruption of society as an end in itself but as a means to an endless cycle of changing existence. It would therefore not be fair to expect her action to produce inordinate wide ranging changes in the affairs of women or even society in general as some might expect of feminist activism. It demonstrates, however, that change is not only inevitable but also desirable.

This kind of reading helps in coming to terms with the other hindrance to positing Nyawir as outside tradition. It is more accurate to say that rather than posit exclusionary and competitive roles for men and women, the couple play complimentary and supporting roles. Although Nyawir takes leadership roles in their house, she never questions the fact that Owiny is constructed, by virtue of his being a man, as the head of the home. Indeed we find her, now and again, reading Owiny's usefulness as primarily in his muscles, meaning not only physical strength but also as a provider and protector. Owiny especially plays his protective role when he restrains the villagers from killing Nyawir after discovering her role in alienating the people from their god. She demonstrates her acceptance of Owiny's masculine role when, although they are going into the mountains as a banished couple, she still maintains that he should go and build her a house in keeping with traditional norms. This is reminiscent of Ochola building a house for Nyawir in Tanzania. It is also interesting that she does not raise any objection to any of the traditional and customary stages in the process of her betrothal and marriage to Owiny. In her own disruptive action, rebellion and desire for change, she reads generation rather than gender politics.

Generations succeed one another, implying that what an elder did when he was a child, his own child will one day try and do better and in an easier way than the way in which the elder had done in his days. That, Owiny, is what development involves and it is the increase in knowledge which builds a nation. *Look I also love our parents and I have faith in our ancestors* (emphasis mine).

By the end of this narrative, Ogot both undermines and validates tradition. As an advocate of women's rights, she posits Nyawir as a strong, fearless sharp-witted, revolutionary social agent. As a defender of traditions she suggests that revolution should be constructed within the provisions of societal values. It is interesting to note that this story, Nyawir's positive contributions notwithstanding, argues that there is value in vetting marriages by examining backgrounds of marriage candidates. This should not be misconstrued as a practice that should only apply to women. Ogot's fiction in general posits that men should also be subjected to scrutiny before a marriage is contracted. In *The Ivory Trinket*, for example, Ogot (1992) acknowledges that women are the ones whose backgrounds are the main object of investigation in a bid to forestall the introduction of bad seed in the man's family. In this story, rather than calling for the jettisoning of this traditional practice, Ogot demonstrates that women too need to investigate men's backgrounds. If Sarah had taken time to investigate Semo's background she would have found out that the man had been married before, had children, and that his previous wife had committed suicide. She would have had the opportunity to make an informed choice and hence been in a better position to handle the visit by Ayiemba's ghost. As an advocate of women's rights Ogot avers that listening to women will be beneficial to society as a whole as well as to men in particular. In the same vein she convincingly demonstrates that there is sense in viewing cultures as dynamic open systems rather than static ones and that change is, in the final analysis, a good thing. Ogot's fear or aversion to cataclysmic disruptions to society also manifests here as she allows Nyawir to be sacrificed by the ancestors so that normalcy can return in society. The fact that Nyawir has to die for society to regain its stability may be taken to underline Ogot's conservative nature or inability to envision a new society devoid of male dominance. However I suggest that Nyawir's death ensures new stability rather than a return to old system. Although, as in many other of Ogot's texts,

women's gains here are minimal, advocacy of their increased involvement in the shaping of society's destiny is approved of and strongly supports the case for reading Ogot as a liberal seeking gradual humanitarian evolution rather than a revolution. Ogot does not oppose change, she only recommends a carefully controlled change that provides society with welcome breaks to get accustomed to newness as opposed to revolutions that maintains restless in society.

Ogot's liberal approach to gender issues is explicit in her only post-colonial novel, *The Graduate* (1980), to which I now wish to turn. This story is set a short period after independence when Africanisation seems to have occupied the minds of Kenyan politicians. Juanina, the heroine of *The Graduate*, is appointed minister for public works after the death of the member of parliament for Nairobi West, Hon. Kung'u, in a road accident. She is given the responsibility for continuing the task of recruiting and encouraging qualified Kenyans abroad to return home and help in the building of the nation and the Africanisation of the labour force. She travels to the U.S on this mission and manages to convince Jacoyo Seda, a graduate with an M.A in engineering, to return home. Jacoyo agrees to return to Kenya in spite of the fact that he has already been offered a lucrative fellowship, complete with a family ticket and a chance to pursue Ph.D studies, at the University of California. The rest of the novel records Jacoyo's attempt to see Juanina back in Kenya, and the attempt by the remnants of the colonial masters to ensure that he does not join the civil service. Thanks to Annabel, Juanina's African secretary, that colonial scheme is exposed and Jacoyo appointed "Chief engineer and City Planner designate" (71).

Stratton says that “in Ogot’s writing, inversion is effected in part by the designation of the national subject as explicitly female” (62). This implies that Ogot pits men against women and hence reverses the tendency to structure the national subject as male. In other words it is pay-back time, a strategy that Stratton acknowledges does not solve the problem of gender but which she nevertheless hails as subversive and therefore good. I suggest that a close reading of Ogot’s works seems to reveal a slightly different picture. While it is true that Ogot does counter both the colonial and African male representation of women as passive and ahistorical, she does not do that by creating a world of heroines without heroes. She does it by creating parallel structures of subjectivity between male and female characters and ascribing significance to women’s contribution to Kenyan, and specifically Luo, societal well-being. My argument is that rather than pitting men against men, Ogot, though cognisant of women’s disadvantaged power positioning vis-à-vis men, nevertheless calls for their partnership in the war against common social evils. This partnership, in Ogot’s view, is best served by empowering women.

As a matter of fact, unlike Stratton, I would argue that Ogot is so keen on male/female co-operation that she fails to provide women with credible, strong and positive subjectivity. Although Juanina is the heroine of *The Graduate*, Jakoyo Seda is the graduate and the technocrat about to take over the running of the civil service. Juanina’s appointment is supposed to have been on merit as opposed to commitment to gender balancing or assuaging but we never get to know what makes her qualified. She merely holds a diploma in trade unionism, unlike the graduates that she is going to recruit “whose heads are full of wisdom” (18). She is going to recruit people with skills while armed simply with honesty, hope and love.

Just as Ngugi romanticises Kenyatta's character by paying attention to his supposedly mystical eyes rather than any concrete contributions, Ogot does not draw our attention to the substance that sets Juanina apart from other Kenyan ministers. Instead she mythologises the mystical eyes and physical appearance of Juanina that seem to magically arrest, captivate and win her audience. Ogot essentially affirms the reason/emotion opposition usually ascribed to men/women respectively. Juanina hypnotises the audience, even those who had come to heckle her, not with the substance of her ideas but with "the charismatic smile on her rotund face" (16). She exudes wealth, power and authority, but all of this can be read only in her appearance. The students are definitely both male and female, but Ogot chooses to foreground only the male students. Jacoyo, Nguire, and Kakuli, all of whom are male students, are the only ones we get close to. The gaze that Ogot uses to assess Juanina, though comprised of both men and women, is therefore very definitely male dominated.

It would be a mistake, though, to conclude that this attention to the body and its traditionally constructed femininity is only a male reading of Juanina. Ogot tells us that to the women students, Juanina is not an epitome of the triumph of women's struggle against African patriarchy but against the divisive and sexist intrusions of colonialism.

We are told that to the women students in particular:

The minister was tangible proof that the coloniser who perpetuated the difference between men and women was dead and buried in Kenya. When the coloniser came he recruited men to help him build his towns and cities. Contrary to African customs he built tiny huts which adult men shared and women were forbidden. When he needed extra hands to help him impose his rule upon the sons of the soil, he built schools for men away from the women, creating a big rift between brother and sister, husband and wife, girl and lover. Having been uprooted from forced labour which was the only means of paying their taxes, the men left the women to serve as custodians of the land and home. A saying soon evolved, that a woman's place was in the home; in the kitchen (16-17).

It is also interesting that to the students, male and female, Juanina is not just a minister, but also a sister and a mother figure. "They saw in this great lady of Africa, an ideal sister an elder sister, who in the African context could deputise for a mother because she had seen the eye of the sun well before they had" (16). Here Ogot is not engaging in gender activism but using the occasion of Juanina's visit to defend African culture. First she suggests that colonialists are the ones who drove a wedge between African men and women. Secondly she suggests that that was effected through violation of African customs such as by making tiny huts for men to share and then forbidding women to enter the huts. This was followed by the building of schools, which helped to widen the rift between men and women. Thirdly, she suggests that the idea that a woman's place is at home was the consequence of colonial taxation which saw men leave their homes in search of salaried jobs. *The Graduate* therefore becomes, not a demonstration of men and women at war, but of African men and women as victims of, and united against, neo-colonialism perpetuated by an equally united front of white men and women. When Jacoyo returns home rigid bureaucracy will not allow him to see the minister, but the most insidious opposition comes from Juanina's white personal assistant, Jane Brown, who solicits the help of her husband, Truddy Brown, to ensure that Jacoyo does not displace their white friend, Ted O'Neil, as the government's chief city planner. It takes the consolidated effort of Annabel Chepkwony, Juanina and Jacoyo to thwart this colonial cartel sustained through hypocrisy, lying and deception. The end of the book is not a triumph against sexism but against racism. This is one reason why Eurocentric feminists might find Ogot less than adequate as a women's rights ambassador.

A second reason why some feminists might react negatively to Ogot's fiction is her treatment of men and their socially constructed positions of leadership at home. Ogot does not posit a linear and monolithic interpretation of patriarchy in terms of good and

evil. It seems to me that she reads it as an institution that has potential for either good or evil. Inability to reconcile Ogot's paradoxical treatment of patriarchy can easily lead one to simplistically inscribe her as either for or against patriarchy. Man in *The Graduate* remains very much the patriarch, the hunter and the gatherer, only this time the tools of trade and the fields have changed. Education and white collar jobs have replaced bows and arrows and the fields have been moved to schools and universities, locally and abroad, as opposed to the tropical plains, hills, valleys or forests. Jacoyo moves to the United States in search of education and stays away for seven years, only to return and find his wife faithfully waiting for him to come home with the spoils. His resilience, in spite of the frustrations that he encounters, is inspired by high expectations from his wife, children and family members. At the peak of his frustrations, the images of "his wife trekking from the river with a debe of water on her head, the children sitting around the dinning room table, picking at their food, thinking, hoping, longing only for when he would keep his promise and go and collect them after signing up a contract" (55) haunted him. "He had promised them good food, good clothing, a good life, a good education in the city" (55). He is very much an unchallenged patriarch, a hunter and a gatherer. Jacoyo's position seems consistent with Ogot's view that among the Luo, traditionally, a man should not get married unless he is able to provide for his wife and children. At this juncture, it is important to emphasise that the presence of patriarchs in Ogot's literature is not an endorsement of patriarchy in its entirety as practised in Luo-land and or Africa in general. My contention is that she picks particular strands of the institution and shows how and why they are oppressive to women in particular, and in the final analysis to society as a whole.

Reading benevolent and desirable strands of patriarchy in *The Graduate* does not suggest that Ogot is happy with the *status quo* and men's handling of affairs within the

context of the book. The novella is an explicit stinging criticism of male leadership for failing to honour and sustain the unity of purpose that had been at the centre of the Mau Mau rebellion. During that struggle men and women were united against their oppressor. "It was in that spirit of co-operation that women and their men moved to the first general elections after independence was won" (10). The male leadership, epitomised by the president, forgets that unity and relegates women to the margin of collectively achieved power. It is the height of injustice that all the senior posts in the government, ministers, permanent secretaries, ambassadors, chairmen of statutory boards, provincial commissioners, and district commissioners, go to the men. Juanina herself is only appointed after the death of Hon. Kung'u, the minister for Public Affairs, in a road accident. It is to Ogot's credit, and a powerful defence of the case for placing women in power in Africa, that Juanina, even though acutely aware of the immense responsibilities to the women of Kenya that her new post gives her, does not set about recruiting women-for-women's sake to fill senior posts in her ministry. As a matter of fact Juanina and Anabell become two women united in defence of their man. This is in spite of the fact that at the opening of the narrative, shortly after Juanina's appointment, the women of Kenya have declared her their light, strength, hero and the chain that links them with their esteemed government. This is the message that "the union of the women of Kenya" (7) send her. The gender imbalance is so obvious that even Nyokabi, her daughter, could capture and eloquently articulate the injustice. Juanina is aware of women's problems such as clean water, nursery schools for their children, health clinics, and education for girls in such areas as engineering, medicine and architecture, yet in spite of this awareness does not pursue an explicit gender agenda. In other words she does not seek to recruit women in order to correct the gender imbalance in the civil service and specifically in her own ministry. It is in consideration of such contexts, in Ogot's literature, that I find it difficult to accept the argument put forward by Stratton,

that Ogot makes men fall apart to create room for women. Men are however the object of Ogot's criticism, especially in their failure to uphold an African unity of purpose.

Ogot's censorship of men for presiding over the erosion of African culture is especially eloquent in her short stories. The stories can in fact be read as offering a counter discourse to male writers such as Okot p'Bitek who, in *Song of Ocol*, presented modern African women as engaging in blind cultural ape-manship of western values. In Ogot's literature men are the culprits. They are quick to offer lip service to African culture but when it comes to the real test, selfish opportunism overcomes them. This is what happens in *The Old White Witch* (1968). In this story, Ogot (1968) is dealing with an insensitive but genuinely benevolent colonialism. Matron Jack, who has been nicknamed the old white witch by the workers, joins a team of missionary doctors serving in western Kenya. According to custom, women in this area are not supposed to carry bedpans, as there are special people to do that kind of job. Matron Jack finds this retrogressive and a failure or refusal to imbibe Christian virtues as opposed to "...walking in the darkness and [being] controlled by taboos and superstition" (12). It is commonly believed that women, who carry *Karaya*, the bedpans, effectively become unclean and therefore unmarriageable. Matron Jack nevertheless decides to enforce a new rule requiring all nurses, male and female, to carry bedpans. The female nurses, led by Monica Adhiambo, find this unacceptable, stage a strike and finally opt to return to their homes to help their mothers in the *shambas* (farms) and to get married rather than capitulate. Back home nurse Adhiambo contracts amoebic dysentery that is so acute that she, against her will, is brought back to the mission hospital unconscious and too late for anything to be done.

Contrary to Florence Stratton's (1994) interpretation, nurse Adhiambo, even in her dying moments, never becomes "co-operative and obedient" (63). When she opens her eyes and finds that she is back at the hospital and realises that her last moment has arrived, she tells her mother to return home and leave her with the old white witch. This can easily be misread as a capitulation but it would mean ignoring the fact that Ogot tells us that Adhiambo wept bitterly when she saw Matron Jack and Dr Joseph, a white male member of staff at the hospital, and realised what her parents had done. Unlike Okwonkwo, Achebe's tragic hero in *Things Fall Apart*, who chose death rather than face humiliation by the colonialists, Adhiambo has no option as she is too weak to impose any decision of her own. Unlike Muthoni's victorious death in Ngugi's *The River Between*, Adhiambo's last moments reflect the anguish of failure. One thing is clear though, her attitude has not changed; Matron Jack is still the old white witch.

The story deals with multi-layered issues. It is possible to be misled to think that Grace Ogot is suggesting that Luo men are passive and obedient. Matron Jack is surprised that in contradiction to what she had always heard, these men are not little Ceasars who treat their women like slaves. Ogot, however, as becomes clear in the analysis of her other works, is not giving men a clean bill of health. Their response in this particular instance ought to be understood within the context of the divisive nature of colonialism. That division is clearly manifested in the reaction of the men as the nurses file out of the hospital. "Some workmen shouted their disapproval while others cheered (13)." The patients are equally divided. Although not stated, it is clear that the new rule would mean more work for the women nurses and less work for the male ones, as the male workers would be relieved the duty of carrying bed pans to the female patients. The only man sufficiently moved by the departure of the nurses to do something about it is Nimrod. His concern is that if the nurses leave, he and his staff would have to distribute

food to some fifty ailing persons and to feed the helpless ones” (14). Selfish motives seem to be behind the men’s apparent co-operation with the colonialists in regard to this issue.

From the foregoing argument, it is clear that colonialism has enlisted indigenous patriarchy to structure a system that is oppressive to the women. When Rev Odhuno, the patriarch whom the nurses regard as a father, shows solidarity with Matron Jack he is in support of colonialism. The men are censored for double standards. In private conversation, Rev Odhuno and Issaca admit that Matron Jack was wrong, yet they are not willing to publicly face up to her. Issaca tells Rev Odhuno:

You and I know that this new rule which enjoins that our girls should carry *Karaya* is wrong. You should not have sided with these administrators publicly, that was bad (15).

The senior men, perhaps in response to this rebuke by Issaca, later show solidarity with the nurses when they stand around and do nothing in the face of the nurses’ rebellion. When the nurses decide to leave the hospital rather than carry *Karaya*, it is men with *pangas* (huge knife-like cutting implements) that are sent to go and stop them. These same workmen, whom Matron Jack had used to hunt, haunt and hound the nurses, wish them good luck and as the nurses leave, it is clear from the look on the men’s faces that they enjoyed the nurses’ rebellion. The men are therefore censored for subscribing to traditions that they are not courageous enough to defend. These are the same men who would not marry women who had been engaged in the practice of carrying *Karaya*. This amounts to selfishness and hypocrisy.

Grace Ogot is not to be mistaken as deconstructing indigenous patriarchy in its entirety. She is not even challenging but asserting patriarchy in this story. Patriarchy constructs women as primarily wives and mothers as opposed to careerists. The nurses’ rebellion is

an elevation of marriage and motherhood above careerism. Monica Adhiambo does not mince her words. Responding to Matron Jack's exhortation to accept the new rule she says;

Long before you came we agreed to nurse in this hospital on the understanding that we were not to carry bedpans. We want to be married and become mothers like any woman in the land. We are surprised that senior members of staff have sneaked behind us to support you when they know perfectly well that no sane man will agree to marry a woman who carries bedpans. A special class of people does this job in our society. Your terms are therefore unacceptable, Matron. You can keep your hospital and the sick. And if Christianity means carrying faeces and urine, you can keep Christianity too. We are returning to our homes (10).

A few pages later, she reconfirms this message to the workers and tells them to go and tell Matron Jack and her people that the nurses were returning to their homes to help their "...mothers in the shambas and to get married (16)". The nurses and the workers constantly refer to Matron Jack as "bikra" (14) (meaning nun and therefore virgin for life) and an old spinster, both of which are derogatory terms in their worldview. There is even a suggestion that marriage, like that of Mrs Ainsworth, would have made Matron Jack more sensitive to the people's customs. As the nurses are leaving, one of the patients says "The old Mrs Ainsworth knew our customs - she was kind to the girls and did not discourage them from getting married. *But this one wants all our young girls to remain bikra like herself*" (14) [emphasis mine].

Ogot makes it difficult for us to attach progressive/retrogressive meanings to the gender landscape in this story. The men support, at least in public, the idea of carrying bedpans by all nurses. In the context of customary regulations this is both modern and revolutionary. It subverts traditional beliefs and customs. We are aware, however, that this modern and revolutionary trait in the men is only on the surface. If you scratch them deep enough, you will find, to paraphrase Dr Joseph's words, "real savages" (20). On the other hand, the female nurses are operating on both reactionary and

revolutionary levels simultaneously. In their defence of traditional beliefs and customs that structure them as primarily wives and mothers, and which force them to base important decisions about their careers on what the male will think and do about it, they are retrogressive, reactionary and conformist. In their resistance to colonial powers that posit them as savages, primitive and backward simply because of their beliefs and customs, they are progressive and revolutionary.

Ogot's most damning indictment of men as a species, irrespective of race, relates to her second pet topic: nuns and prostitutes. It is to this topic that I now wish to turn to and demonstrate Ogot's Afrocentric approach to women's issues, especially in relation to sexuality. Interestingly and significantly, in as far as inscribing Ogot as an Afrocentric feminist is concerned, although not a single heroine in any of Ogot's fiction is either a nun or prostitute, virginity is central to the drama that unfolds for nearly all of her female protagonists. Mother Helena, who runs a children's home in *Elizabeth* (Ogot 1968), is the closest we come to a nun, and that only because she is evocative of Catholic nuns engaged in missions of mercy. Taplalai, the house maid in *The Other Woman*, (Ogot 1976) is forced into a kind of prostitution in that she demands payment for sex with Jerry, her employer, but that is her choice in the place of rape. She is a woman who negotiates for the better option faced with two unacceptable evils. Jedidah, the heroine of *The Honourable Minister* (Ogot 1976), is very nearly driven to prostitution by greed and envy, but hers is a case of "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" scenario. She cannot be called a prostitute because she does not ever get to actually engaging in illicit sexual activity and she never, mentally or otherwise, views her behaviour as a viable life style. She is representative of the extremes to which women are driven by contemporary harsh social and economic realities.

Ogot's Afrocentricity drives her to use virgins as characters in her fiction as opposed to nuns. Nuns are usually associated with virginity because they give up their sexual lives in exchange for a symbolic marriage to Christ. Nuns and virgins are emblematic of purity, innocence and charity. They are also associated with moral strength, resilience and restraint. In the context of Ogot's literature, there is a difference between nuns and virgins because nuns, unlike virgins, trace their choice of "nunhood" to Euro-Christian or Judaeo-Christian traditions. Being a nun assumes that the subject has given up on sex for ever. That African women do not subscribe to "nunhood" is explicit in *The Old White Witch* where Matron Jack is continuously and derisively referred to as *bikra*, meaning one who had chosen to remain single and virgin, a nun. Ogot is not suggesting that there is an intrinsic moral difference between nuns and virgins, she is only suggesting that Afrocentricity provides for virgins but not for nuns. The difference is that if you choose to be a nun, you have also chosen not to marry. However, the choice of virginity in the African context is only a choice against pre-marital sex. It is an expression of faith in marriage. Nuns on the other hand view marriage as a distraction from the more important task of serving God.

Female virginity is a greatly priced virtue in most traditional African cultures. Most of Ogot's heroines are virgins at some point in the beginning of her narratives, and men come under severe censorship for forcefully defiling or mistreating the virgins and hence treating the women like prostitutes. Ogot is in effect inscribing virginity as a choice, and prostitution as a violation of women's purity. Ogot acknowledges that virginity was something women kept in order to please their mothers and grandmothers and in anticipation of offering it to men (their husbands), but this neither lessens the element of choice nor the sense of satisfaction it gave those women who managed to keep it. In the context of Ogot's narratives, virginity is a choice because there are

women who, in spite of the premium society places on it, choose not to keep it. Felomena Warirwa in *The White Veil* (Ogot 1968) is an example. Although sexual violation is gross and inadmissible for any one, Ogot uses virgins to heighten that violation. In no other story is this violation more succinctly and bluntly demonstrated than *Elizabeth* (Ogot 1968). Elizabeth had, in conformity to custom, as fearfully inculcated in her by her grandmother, remained a virgin even though she had been to America, the land of sexual freedom, with her boyfriend. She is raped by Mr Jimbo, her boss in Kenya

Elizabeth makes several points. Through the story Ogot argues that violation of women's sexuality is related to women's power and especially economic power. There is, indeed, a Jimbo trope in Ogot's short stories in the sense of men exploiting their relative economic power, vis-à-vis women, to rape them with impunity. Mr Jimbo, the villain of *Elizabeth*, rapes Elizabeth after posing for several months as an angelic father figure to her. Mr Jimbo is the general manager or the departmental head, it is not explicitly stated, at the department of aviation where Elizabeth had begun working as his secretary only a few months prior to the rape episode. Mr Jimbo has his double in Jerry, the rapist and villain of *The Other Woman* (Ogot 1976). Like Mr Jimbo, Jerry works as the general manager of Aviation. Like Mr Jimbo, he has a beautiful and faithful wife. In spite of minor differences, both men impregnate their victims. Jimbo impregnates Elizabeth, his secretary, while Jerry impregnates several of his house helps/maids before his wife catches him red-handed with another. The common factor for all these women is the power that their aggressors wield over them.

Ogot suggests that theirs is not a unique or isolated experience but a universal one. Women, especially secretaries, typists and copy-typists are victims of sexual harassment

by their male bosses. Mrs. Kimani, the labour officer that Elizabeth goes to see after her rape in the hope of finding employment as something other than a secretary, shows her a group of other secretaries and typists who, like Elizabeth, have suffered shame and cruelty in the city. Like Elizabeth, sexual harassment was driving them to careers other than their chosen fields. And this is not an African problem, it is a universal problem. First, Elizabeth works for an American motor firm where she lasts only four months. It is safe to assume that her boss was American since those were days, though it is still largely true even today, when most foreign firms gave senior positions to their own nationals. She was working for the assistant manager. She then works as a secretary to the manager of Wholesalers and Distributors Limited who is European. Both of the men make it explicit that “she ought to be a cheap girl ready to sell her body for promotion and money” (190). The implication, another point that *Elizabeth* makes, is that it is not that women are prostitutes but that men inscribe and treat them as prostitutes. Elizabeth’s final and most harrowing experience is in her few months’ stint as Mr Jimbo’s, an African’s, secretary. This suggests that while foreigners, white men, demand and expect sexual favours from their female African juniors, it is the African men who are ready to engage in rape. In effect, Americans, Europeans and African male bosses are all guilty of sexual harassment and treating women like prostitutes.

The theme of men inscribing women as prostitutes runs through other short stories by Ogot and in all of them, men occupy positions of power vis-à-vis the women. In *The Middle Door* (Ogot 1976), Mrs. Muga, a writer based in Nairobi, takes a train to Kisumu on her way to her rural home. She has booked a first class compartment but to her consternation she finds that a rural woman carrying chicken, bananas and other luggage has somehow found her way into her compartment. Being a writer and wanting silence and privacy, she engineers, using the ticket officer, the removal of the rural

woman from her compartment. Unknown to her, her neighbours are policemen and removing the village woman only exposes her, Mrs Muga, to the wiles of the police officers. When they break into her room and demand sex their rationale is a classic representation of the relationship between women's bodies, men's gaze and prostitution.

This is their argument:

You give it to other men who give you money. We must have it too, with or without money. Look at your painted nails. Look at your hair and polished face. You are not married to one man, we know it. The type married to one man are the ones like the woman you chased from your compartment. The simple housewife, not you (31).

To the policemen, Mrs. Muga's painted nails, polished face and well groomed hair sends only one message: she is a prostitute. Prostitution, unlike virginity is not something that women choose but it is indicative of violation of women's sexual rights and the right to self-definition. At the end of the journey, Mrs. Muga is surprised to find that the same policemen had organised her arrest on charges of being in illegal possession of a gun. It turns out, however, that the gun she had used to scare off the policemen was only a toy. In this short story, as in others, we encounter the Jimbo trope and the relationship between power and women being raped.

One of the most disappointing things about Ogot's heroines, in the face of abuse, violation and oppression, is their inability to engage in convincing resistance. It is perhaps one of the reasons that some critics have advised her to take lessons from the western women's liberation activists. Elizabeth is a good example. Rather than fight she runs away from company to company. When she finally commits suicide, the act is more out of desperation than any careful planning that takes into consideration the full ramifications of her action. While she leaves behind a notebook in which she has indicted Mr Jimbo, that he will be punished is dependent on whether we can trust a male dominated police force, whose officers are mirrored as rapists themselves in *The Middle*

Door, to act on the evidence. Taplalai is another good example. Her physical strength, her source of power, gives her an advantage over weak Jerry whose only “shield in life was a chain of degrees” (53), but rather than fight back she negotiates the conditions of her exploitation. Taplalai deconstructs the myth of silent passive rural women by managing to force Jerry to have sex on her own terms and get paid for it in return. However she succumbs and gives in to exploitation. Economic power is a key factor in her kind of resistance. Her mother and children depended on her for sustenance.

Ogot seems to suggest that the more economically disadvantaged the women are the more they are likely to suffer sexual exploitation and abuse. This is amply demonstrated in the one exception to Ogot’s heroines’ inability to engage in resistance: Jedidah, the protagonist of *The Other Woman*. She differs from the other victims because of her economic power. She is highly educated and sophisticated. Unlike the rest of the women who occupy low-paid, powerless positions as secretaries, typists, primary school teachers and house helps, she works as an executive secretary at the international Aid to Africa office in Nairobi. She not only successfully manages to resist her new boss’s sexual advances but also keeps her job by threatening to use her cousin in power at the immigration office and have him deported. This however does not make for real victory because the boss reacts by punishing her with too much work that makes her unable to satisfy her husband’s sexual desires. Her Jimbo in the office translates into another Jimbo in the form of her husband, who, unable to find sexual fulfilment in his wife, turns to raping Taplalai the house girl. Jedidah becomes suspicious and, using her economic power, employs a boy to investigate the matter. She catches Jerry and Taplalai red-handed and attacks them with a knife, wounding both of them seriously. Unfortunately she targets Taplalai more than she targets her own husband. As

unsatisfactory as her resistance may be, she demonstrates that there is a relationship between women's oppression, their resistance and economic power.

It has been argued, especially by men, that feminism is a western movement largely opposed to African traditions and customs. Ogot's fiction demonstrates that the basis of Afrocentric feminism is not western values, but is rooted in African customs and traditions. According to this view, if any one has betrayed African customs and traditions, it is the men. O'Barr (1987) in an article covering seven Kenyan women authors, argues that the women concentrate on or apply life-cycle approaches to gender roles. She names the cycles as becoming adults, marrying, and working. The centrality of marriage to Ogot's fiction and the failure of many of her heroines to conceive of the possibility of fulfilment outside or without the institution is intriguing and problematic for a writer we wish to inscribe as feminist. Read as an Afrocentric feminist and in the context of her particular community, however, she emerges not so much as a reactionary but as a severe critic of men for their lip-service to traditions and customs. It needs to be said that Ogot neither romanticises nor disavows marriage. She inscribes it as an institution of multiple possibilities. There are those like Nyapol in *The Promised Land* who find loneliness and imprisonment in it, and others like Mrs. Mjomba who find such marital bliss that not even death can disrupt. There are those whose marriages are wrecked by irresponsible and wayward husbands such as in *The Wayward Father* (Ogot 1976) and *The Other Woman*, but there are also others who ruin their own stable, loving marriages, such as June in *The Honourable Minister*. While acknowledging that Ogot fails to provide a vision for women beyond and outside the institution of marriage, I wish to submit that over-emphasis on this aspect decentres her works from their major concern, criticism of men.

We need to examine the context in which Ogot is writing. She is writing within a community where death, burial and ancestors are central to the conduct of the living. She is writing in an environment where divorce does not exist or is not socially recognised even if legal divorce papers are obtained. In an interview with me (Ogot 1998) she revealed that among the Luo a woman's place of burial is determined by her marriage. If she dies before she marries or outside marriage she is buried outside her father's homestead which, among the Luo, is disgraceful and tantamount to being rejected. The importance of death and burial to the Luo is central to marriage as demonstrated by the Wambui Otieno case discussed in chapter one. For the living as well as the dead the centrality of death is an inescapable social phenomenon. I should state that Ogot does not believe that this practice of tying women's burial place to marriage must continue. She has indeed been campaigning against the practice, but it does help explain one of the major reasons why marriage is so important to Luo women. Luos seem to esteem decent burial above other things such as property and children.

Besides death and burial, marriage is also related to property inheritance. In this regard Ogot (1998) had this to say: "As you know, a Luo girl marries there, it is her right to inherit the shamba that her mother-in-law had. At that stage, she is given her shamba immediately. Because we inherit through marriage all the good things that a Luo woman gets. It is in that marriage also where we say she is oppressed but she is very important, the first wife." This quote does seem to suggest that only the first wife seems to benefit from this traditional affair, but in the context of Ogot's fiction, a man should ideally have only one wife unless he is very rich and can therefore provide wealth for each of his wives. It is interesting that although Luos are traditionally polygamous, Ogot only mirrors polygamous families of chiefs, such as in *The Strange Bride*, and *The Bamboo Hut* (Ogot 1968), of rich men such as Nyagar in *The Green Leaves* (Ogot

1968) or Tekayo in a story named after him, or in very special circumstances such as pressure from the women as in *The Promised Land*. Poor people such as Nyamgondho in *The Fisherman* (Ogot 1976) remain monogamous till they are able to, for him by the help of a mysterious old woman, create wealth. In a sense then to choose marriage, for Luo women, is not only a spiritual insurance scheme but also a choice of wealth against poverty, inheritance against disinheritance. In a sense Ogot is saying that there should be a direct relationship between marriage and economic stability, especially in regard to polygamy.

There is also, among the Luo, and according to Ogot, a relationship between marriage and power or leadership opportunities. Referring to her own election as a member of parliament representing Gem in Luo land she had this to say: “ If I was single, I may not have been voted for in Luo-land...because you see, I also better talk of what I know. Because as I told you as a single girl, I will not stand in Asembo, that is where my brother Bob stood. I stand in Gem because that is where I am a mother there, I have a right. What a single girl would have done, I do not know. In Luo-land, unlike Kikuyu-land, she would not be voted” (Ogot 1998). In this context it is not surprising that none of Ogot’s heroines is single by choice, divorced or contemplating divorce. This is in spite of her recognition of the terrible pains that women endure in pursuit of marriage. My suggestion is that Ogot uses an analysis of marriage to reverse the predominantly male dominated construction of women as bad, irresponsible, unfaithful and culturally rootless people blindly following the ways of the white man.

In *The White Veil* (Ogot 1968) men are shown to be unbelievably erratic, irresponsible and unfaithful. Owila, who has been dating Achola for five years, suddenly and without warning declares that unless Achola agrees to sex before marriage, he will break off the

engagement. His source of inspiration is a white couple, John and Jenny, who in spite of Jenny's being a Sunday school teacher, do not mind having pre-marital sex. There are three reasons why Achola does not want to engage in pre-marital sex. First is the fear of what people would say if they found out, second is the demand of Christianity, third and most compelling are cultural demands and especially the desire to please her mother. In fact she finds the mosaic commandment "thou shall not commit adultery" (119) rather inadequate as it does not make it clear whether that means sleeping with your brother's wife only or also includes sex between boys and girls. The tribal commandments are clearer and easy to remember: a girl must be a virgin on the wedding day.

As in other Ogot stories, maintenance of virginity by girls to please their mothers, grandmothers and future husbands rather than personal satisfaction is not critically examined. This story's main concern, as others, is to interrogate men's double standards. They want to marry virgins and yet want sex before marriage. Although Owila himself does not make the demand or even seem to expect it, it is implied in this narrative and others that virginity pleases men and therefore they can be presumed to hope for or even expect it. The essence of the story, however, is the assertion that it is men who are in violation of cultural demands by aping the white man's ways. It is interesting that Achola, though a Christian, turns to a traditional prophetess in an attempt to stop Owila from marrying Felomena Warirwa, a village girl he had picked up immediately after breaking up with Achola. Together, Achola and the prophetess exploit the rigidity of Christianity and the imperfection in its rituals to make Owila marry Achola without knowing because she is veiled, hence the title *The White Veil*. Even after discovering the error and deception, there is not much the priest, Owila, or Felomena can do, as Christian marriages bind couples till death does them part.

There is no doubt that Achola's handling of the situation leaves a lot to be desired, especially in her obstinate insistence on marrying a man who had rejected her. On the other hand it is accurate to argue that she did not necessarily want to remain his wife physically and that it mattered precious little what Owila would do after discovering the deception because she only wanted to marry him in her heart; which she did. She argues that she may not marry Owila physically but that if she marries him in her heart, then she will have something to live for. In other words she is willing to lose him physically, which she cannot prevent, so long as she can keep him symbolically. Through Achola Ogot seeks to demonstrate women's strength of character and trustworthiness as opposed to men's treachery. The association of women and tradition as opposed to men's betrayal of the same becomes much more explicit and convincing if this story is read in the context of Ogot's other stories. In *Pay Day*, Awino suffers physical violence because her husband is not there to protect her. Her husband, rather than conform to tradition in response to Awino's barrenness by marrying another woman and building her a hut in the same compound with his first wife, and in spite of pleas by Awino that he does so, marries and moves away from his first wife.

The same theme of men violating traditions and customs is eloquently delineated in *The Wayward Father* and *The Empty Basket*. In *The Wayward Father*, Anastasia, while censoring her husband, Mika, for secretly marrying a university student, articulates this position most succinctly:

All this time I should have known! You cherished our customs and traditions. You glibly talked about their preservation and accused me of teaching our children Western ideas, yet you only cherish traditions when they suit you. No real man, of respect and dignity would cheat a mere child into marriage without the knowledge of his wife or the parents of the child (17)!

Notice how this resonates with the behaviour of the men in *The Old White Witch*, where men who know that carrying *Karaya* is not traditionally acceptable side with the

colonial system to demand that women do it. In both cases men have abdicated their responsibilities as custodians of the customs and traditions of the tribe. In *The Empty Basket*, they have not only failed to live up to expectations, but they are absent when they are needed most. Ojwang is away in Ukwala working as a police inspector while his wife and two children, one seven months old and the other two years old, are left behind to cultivate their farm in Kadibo village. While it is explained that they could not stay together because they needed someone to cultivate the land and supplement the husband's meagre income, it nevertheless does not lessen the fact that when a snake enters his house and threatens his children, the man who is supposed to provide security for his home is absent. This is not helped by the fact that his wife had asked him several times to clear the bush around their house which he did not do. Had he done it, the snake would not have been in their house in the first place. And to make the matters worse, the men left in the village are too cowardly to help. These are men who have failed to live up to their customary and traditionally defined role as protectors and providers. It is not just that they are autocratic and oppressive but that they are not men enough.

In the context of the foregoing interpretation of Ogot's works several things become explicitly manifest. First, that she defies easy classification as either for or against African customs and traditions. Secondly, that the best way to read her is as an Afrocentric feminist, which means that she validates as well as deconstructs African patriarchy. She picks the oppressive strands in that system, key among them being the tendency to silence women, and convincingly and eloquently demonstrates that that tendency is destructive not only to women but to men as well. She picks the benevolent provisions in African patriarchy, such as the demand that men take the responsibility to provide for their families, and suggests ways in which men have failed in their

fulfilment of this obligation as well as possible ways in which they could succeed. One way in which success can be achieved is by making it a joint venture where men and women, such as Owiny and Nyawir, join forces as members of a family unit to fight off collective onslaught against either one of them. The other strategy would be for men to avoid unilateral decision making, such as Ochola does to his detriment, but make women part and parcel of the decision making process. Thirdly Ogot successfully demonstrates that Afrocentric feminism jettisons oppressive structures in tribal traditions and customs while defending beneficial ones. Indeed Ogot argues that if any one has turned their backs on traditions and customs, it is African men in their response to the experience of colonialism and their treatment of African women. A glaring example of this state of affairs is the fact that men occupy most government positions even though independence was achieved through the efforts of both sexes. Although a woman, Sally Kosgei, has recently been appointed secretary to the cabinet, women's participation in government is still minimal. The Kenyan government does not have a single woman cabinet minister and there has only been one in the thirty-six years that Kenya has been independent. In a parliament of more than two hundred members, there are only nine women members of parliament. Finally, Ogot's kind of feminism is both disruptive and creative. It envisions the need for normalcy, but one which is located in a constantly changing world and which acknowledges that change can be wrought by women as well as by men.

Chapter Five

Narratives of Pain: Kenyan Women's History in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye's Fiction

But for most of us the buffalo charges from the land and the hippo from the water. It makes no difference where we stand.

Macgoye (1993) in Murder in Majengo.

This chapter, first and foremost, demonstrates two fundamental arguments in this thesis. First, that to be Afrocentric is not a matter of colour. Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye is white and was born in Southampton, England in 1928. She came to Kenya in 1954 as a missionary bookseller and in 1960 married a Luo man, Oludhe Macgoye, with whom she has four children. Her husband is now dead but Macgoye has made Kenya her home, not just physically but also culturally, as shall become clear in my analysis of her works. When I interviewed her in 1998, I asked her whether she considered herself British, Kenyan, Kenyan Briton or a Luo and this was her response:

I consider myself a Kenyan. Obviously my British heritage, like any other natural heritage is still there. And when you get older, you may find that some of your early pre-occupations come back. You know, you have rebelled against them. You have made a different kind of life. But come back to seeing well, may be that was not so stupid after all. In those days that I rebelled against to do that which was within a community as far as it was a community. I certainly do not see myself as a Kenyan white, I mean, I do not think that there is a community of Kenyan whites although, there are a few people, not necessarily citizens, who make an agglomeration but they do not actually make a community. So, yes I see myself as a Kenyan and the sub-category is bound to be Luo.

The accuracy of that self-definition, I submit, is more than attested to by all of her works of art. They express a Kenyan consciousness. All her creative works are set in Kenya and explore Kenyan themes such as the struggle against colonialism, political murders such as those of J.M. Kariuki and Tom Mboya who were killed during Kenyatta's reign, post-colonial disillusionment and the search for nationhood. These themes are explicated from the point of view of African protagonists with the exception of *Homing In* and to a certain extent *Murder in Majengo*. Even in these novels, the

white protagonists in my opinion have cultivated enough cultural literacy of the indigenous communities to warrant their views being considered Afrocentric. Macgoye demonstrates knowledge of African systems of thought in her choice of Luo words and sayings as well as in employing Luo cultural themes in her novels. She constantly makes reference to Luo cultural practices, taboos and proverbs in much the same way Achebe does in reference to the Ibo of Nigeria. In *Victoria*, for example, Victoria cannot spend a night in her daughter's house as Luo mothers cannot sleep under the same roof with a son-in-law. In her latest novel, *Chira*, she uses a Luo mythology about a wasting disease that strikes people who defile themselves by engaging in forbidden practises, such as sexual liaisons with relatives, to explore the ravaging effects of AIDS among the Luo of Kenya. It is of course true, as she herself attests to in the quote above, that her British birth and early upbringing do exact some influence on her world-view, and this can be seen in the way she is more inclined to challenge some African institutions such as the concept of home as well as her reluctance to criticise Christian missionaries, but my argument is that she demonstrates a transformation that makes her more Kenyan than British.

The second fundamental point that this chapter demonstrates is that one does not have to embrace the term feminist to display a feminist consciousness. In other words it is possible for a writer's works to be feminist in content even though he/she denies that they are feminist. In my interview with her, Macgoye not only refused to embrace the term but also declared that she was not sympathetic to the movement. She even refused to be drawn into what I would have considered dispassionate discussions on the subject such as differences that might be evident between Kenyan and British feminists. In defence of her position she said:

I am not really a very suitable person to ask about that because as you have already established, I am not very sympathetic to this movement. ... But I find

this whole situation difficult, because I have never doubted that it is a privilege to be a woman. You would expect that a person who calls herself feminist would like being a woman, but in fact many people who call themselves feminists seem to go out of their way to emulate men! And that I find difficult to understand (1998).

However, in spite of her repudiation of feminism, her works of fiction examine such issues as the institution of marriage, family, work and government from what I would consider a feminist perspective as expounded in my first and second chapter of this thesis and as will become clear in the course of this chapter. In short, her texts exhibit the conviction that women are victims of social regulations designed by and to serve patriarchy and that that condition ought to be rectified if equality and justice for women is to be achieved. I shall be arguing in this chapter that Macgoye's fiction, namely *Coming to Birth* (1986), *The Present Moment* (1987), *Victoria and Murder in Majengo* (1993) *Homing In* (1994), and *Chira* (1997), construct Kenyan women's experience of history in terms of narratives of pain. Whether Macgoye invites us to witness the narratives as they become manifest in the women characters' daily lives such as *Coming to Birth*, or as the women access their past experiences through memory, reverie or dreams as in *The Present Moment*, the narratives are painful and emblematic of women's search for a home. This search for a home is evocative of Virginia Wolf's idea of women finding a room of their own. Macgoye challenges African women to confront and come to terms with their own narratives of pain and argues that only then can they find a place, physical or metaphysical, that they can call their home. This chapter pays particular attention to three thematic aspects of Macgoye's fiction: the structuring of characters' lives against the background of a growing nation, the re/construction of the concept of home, and Macgoye's attitude, as revealed in her fiction, toward African cultural practices and institutions such as female circumcision, polygamy, wife inheritance and marriage. I limit myself to her fiction, as opposed to her poetry, historical and theoretical writings, because only her fiction is consistently and

substantially concerned with women. She has also written more fiction than any other form of writing.

Women's painful experience of history in Kenya is perhaps Macgoye's most constant theme. *The Present Moment*, set in post-colonial Kenya, in a poverty-stricken outer suburb of Nairobi known as Pangani, centres around seven old women out of a group of thirty living in a home, simply referred to in the novel as the Refuge. Macgoye avers (Macgoye 1998) that it was her most "painless birth" as she used material she had collected while researching for her historical work, *The Story of Kenya: A Nation in the Making*, to create it. Using reverie to employ multiple narrative voices, by allowing each of the women to narrate their experiences as they remember them, the novel retraces the lives of the women, their struggles and pains, and eventually their encounter with oppressive social forces that finally force them into the home as women in need of care. This is especially painful for the women as custom had inculcated in them the practice of giving care rather than being on the receiving end. Wairimu, the eldest, ran away from home as a young woman to work in coffee plantations rather than be forced into marriage, rose to become an active politician recruiting people to join the party fighting for independence, participated in the Mau Mau struggle for land and political freedom as an informer, and also occasionally hid the Mau Mau fighters when the need arose, only to finally have her kiosk¹ demolished by soldiers in a post-independent Kenya. Sickly, penniless and destitute she collapsed and was taken by good samaritans to the Refuge. Each of the women has a similar experience. Like Wairimu, Nekesa too had her kiosk demolished by soldiers on the suspicion of her being Ugandan. Her arm was broken and friends took her to Kenyatta National Hospital from where she was directed to the home. Bessie became a victim of the 1982 attempted coup against Moi's

¹ Makeshift small scale business (shop) usually selling household consumables like sugar, cooking fat, soft drinks, salt etc

government when her soldier son was killed before her eyes and her shanty maliciously demolished. This experience affected her so much that throughout the novel she suffers from a post-traumatic disorder. Sophia lost her property in an accidental fire that killed her daughter and two grandchildren. Her son-in-law held her responsible for the fire, suspecting her of setting the house on fire to spite him, and refused to take care of her. She too became destitute and found her way to the Refuge. Priscilla is the only one who was taken to the home genuinely as a case of old age. However, her life was also not devoid of a painful experience. She lost her family in a brutal attack by Mau Mau fighters on a white family whom she and her father were working for and living with. Finally there is Rahel, who was forced into the Refuge after an accident that maimed her when she had no close relatives to look after her. Behind each of the women's final journey to the refuge is a narrative of pain.

Although the home's name suggests a place of comfort where one hides from a violent and cruel outside world, it is also some kind of a prison. The Refuge is compared to marriage, motherhood and widowhood in the way it forces women to alter their identities. Once they got into the Refuge, the women "...were not allowed to beg..., and each one made herself into a different person to fit the situation just as she had done on marriage, motherhood [and] widowhood...." (Macgoye 1987, 6). One of the ways in which the women are obliged to take their new identities at the Refuge is in the way the attempt at harmonisation and unity for those living at the Refuge implicitly demands that the women suppress memories of their past. This suppression is vividly captured by the women when a mad man passes by the Refuge wearing rags and hanging pieces of metals over his shoulders to mimic a soldier's uniform and medals. Wairimu, the oldest of the women in the Refuge, runs to the road and breaks into a dance that provokes the mad man to "...roar out a dozen obscenities in English" (5). To some of the old women,

we are told, this "...stirred memories which were *better suppressed* in their present respected surroundings" [emphasis mine] (5). Mama Chungu, another of the old ladies at the refuge who remembers the mad man from her begging days outside a mosque in Nairobi, realises that like the mad man who uses English rather than "the intimate birth language that would allow one to divine and assuage his grief" (6), the women too "...were all masked here for the sake of sharing, since they had been brought up to see sharing as the ultimate goal and there remained this sisterhood of constraint to share with" (6). Throughout the novel the women characters are constantly struggling with identity related binary oppositions such as revelation and concealment, speech and silence, celebration and shame, and the conflict between the will to activate and to suppress memory, as they attempt to come to terms with their different experiences of history. Macgoye seems to use the women to explore "...the knowledge of the struggle and shame which had been locked down below the layer of conscious speech..." (127) in the lives of Kenyan women. These are the words that are used in reference to Bessie who is one of the most anonymous characters in the novel and hence the archetypal character representing women's suppressed or erased history. She is the most anonymous for two reasons. First, her trauma means she cannot remember most of the things that have happened to her, and secondly she attempts to erase her history because she finds it too painful to confront.

The stories of the women are told against the backdrop of Kenya's history, and particularly the experiences of colonialism, the first and second world wars, and independence and post-independence, with the intention of exploring all the pains and frustrations, hopes and disappointments, joys and sadness that accompanied the events. Macgoye painstakingly provides details of events complete with dates and names of historical characters, so that the experiences of the women become these experience of

the nation. The attempt by the women to come to terms with their past is also a call for the nation to re-examine its past in order to come to terms with its heritage, painful as it may be, and hence make a conscious choice about the kind of future it seeks to pursue. Macgoye is being a Kenyan historian and nationalist just like other Kenyan writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Indeed the contrast in this novel with Ngugi wa Thiongo's *A Grain of Wheat*, for example, is not in subject but in privileging the female voice and hence enabling us to gain an understanding of what it was like to experience the emergence of Kenya as a nation from the perspective of women. Though the women are not flat but well-rounded characters who experience failure and success, sadness and happiness, subjecthood as well as victimhood, the dominant emotion in their lives is pain.

The novel opens and closes with Wairimu, the spokesperson of the group by virtue of being the oldest woman in the Refuge, who was born in 1902 and was therefore eighteen years old when Kenya was declared a British protectorate in 1920. Her year of birth is also, according to some historians, approximately the time that European settlers and colonists begun trickling into the country. She describes her growing up as a time of restraint and limitation, not just on the basis her being African but primarily because of being a girl. As a girl she was only presented with two choices; picking coffee or looking after men. Wairimu suggests that her experience was not unusual but rather the norm for every girl from her home area in those days. In contrast, the boys had the option of going to school and therefore opening up further choices and opportunities in terms of jobs, working in European farms or serving in the war. Serving in the war was beneficial to the men, in spite of their having been forced into it, not only because it earned them money and enabled them to travel to other lands but because it opened their eyes to issues of equality and freedom. Women were further constrained in the sense

that their destiny was socially and culturally mapped out for them even if they managed to secure a place in the few schools available for them. Society only allowed women to picture themselves as "... Wairimu, girl - Wairimu, bride – Wairimu, mother, Wairimu, elder wife - Wairimu, grandmother - but nothing to choose between them, only to be chosen" (54). When Waitito, the man who takes away her innocence, disappoints her by marrying someone else, she is still grateful to him because his stories of Nairobi had opened her eyes to other opportunities.

Wairimu's history of resistance, therefore, was not just against colonialism but also against limiting culturally defined social norms. Rather than bow to an arranged marriage after her disappointment with Waitito, Wairimu ran away to work in the European coffee farms and then went to Nairobi in an attempt to expand her horizons. Her argument was that she wanted to "...enter a wider world than the Kikuyu world...understand Nairobi...earn money" (54) and "...go home with power - that meant with presents and knowledge like a boy" (54). This would ensure that even if she were paired, it "...would not be within the daily tramp for water, digging and shelling, peeling and digging again, bent under firewood" (55). Rather than celebrate the fact that women were in control of the three essential elements of life: water, fire and food, as Mazrui (1993) seems to suggest in his article on the problem of gender and the African woman, she says she had come to realise that much as these elements are important, "...it is not necessary to being a woman to be bent against the painful forehead-strap with a little hump down on your spine and danger in bearing children because of it" (55).

Macgoye's women are not silent victims as African women have often been portrayed. She acknowledges that African women have, to use Mrs Reinhold's words, experienced

“disaster after disaster” (36), and that they have been severely buffeted in life but also argues that they have maintained “a resilience and self-confidence” (36-37) that is hard to find among people who have gone through such pains. Although the women have lost everything they have had: property, children, husbands and freedom, their lives are not shattered. They are not shattered because they had grown in expectation of the worst though hoping for the best. Traditionally the women had lived eventful lives in terms of “...plagues, famines, migrations and raiding parties” (37). They lived “...in the hope of a calm course of life in which your husband was always nice to you, your children mostly stayed alive, you were surprised if there was nothing palatable to eat and were sure that your daughters-in-law would look after you in old age” (37) but they never took that for granted. It is in this context that although nearly all the women have had these hopes dashed, none of them is completely broken.

A second reason that the women’s spirits remain unbroken is that their lives have not been histories of loss and failure only. They have also been histories of resistance and varied degrees of victory. Each of the women has experienced both disaster and resistance. Wairimu, for example, not only resisted forced marriage, took up paid employment and educated herself but she also, contrary to custom, eventually married herself off even though the marriage did not work. She entered a trial marriage on her own terms with a man who, rather than pay dowry to her father, taught her reading, washing and ironing heavy clothes for men and how to live in a cement house and keep it clean. Although these skills revolve around men, they could have turned out very useful and earned her a lot of money if she chose employment in a European house. She even “upset the order of events with a vengeance” (93) when she arranged the marriage between her father, after the death of his first wife, and her friend Wanja for a token dowry. The idea of a daughter arranging marriage for her father is unheard of in

Kikuyu-land even today. Wairimu had not only resisted being a passive object but had become an active and revolutionary social agent.

A similar scenario can be constructed for each of the other women. Rahel, who when the novel opens is in a coma and oscillating between life and death, declares “I have had to do with fighting all my life” (35). She was first forced to take over the leadership of her home when her husband went to fight in the second world war. When her husband came back, the trauma of the war, coupled with finding that one of his wives had been unfaithful, proved too much for him. One day, he just collapsed and died. Rahel was left to take care of the family and to carry on the fish business that her husband had begun for his eldest son Omondi. Unfortunately Omondi, together with a cousin of his, capsized in their boat and drowned. In spite of the tragedy, Rahel managed to keep the fish business going. Tragedy struck again when her son deserted the army, disappeared from the scene and never contacted her again. It is only insinuated that he was the same mad man that occasionally patronised the precincts of the Refuge, by which time Rahel had become too sickly to recognise him. To make the matters worse her daughter was clubbed to death by a violent husband. Rahel’s experience is one of neglect, deprivation and loss as well as of striving, resisting and fighting the buffetings of life. One major victory for her is her successful rebuttal of wife inheritance attempts after the death of her husband.

Like Wairimu and Rahel, the other women also have stories of victimhood and tragedy as well as resistance. Mama Chungu is sexually exploited by a white man, abandoned by her father, suffers a miscarriage and loses two children at a tender age. The death of her children leaves her psychotic. The pain of her experience is reflected in her current name, Mama Chungu, which roughly translates as woman in pain. As a consequence of

her mistreatment by Robert, the white man, she rejects further men's advances to shield herself from more pain. Sophia, who, like Mama Chungu also grew up in Mombasa, loses her first husband, Ali, in an accident and then experiences a still birth and two miscarriages in her new marriage with Henry. In later years her daughter Hawa and two grandchildren die in a fire accident while another grandson, Baraka, is murdered a few steps from the Refuge. She, like the other women, is plagued by memories of loss. In terms of resistance she refuses to have a marriage arranged for her, changes her faith from Islam to Christianity, and marries a man of her choice. Without going in to the details of all the other women, it is clear that Macgoye's conception of African women is as both victims and fighters. She suggests that women, even in traditional Africa, were involved in acts of resistance to oppressive and tyrannical systems and that they had varying degrees and instances of victory in their capacities as individual women. This, in my opinion, is indicative of an Afrocentric feminism in the sense that Macgoye mirrors active women, conscious of and fighting for their rights even though they have no awareness of western feminism.

Perhaps the story that best demonstrates the intricacies of African women's resistance to patriarchal and socially oppressive rules and regulations in traditional Africa is *Victoria*. In the eponymous novella, Victoria is married off to an old man in a polygamous family in conformity with traditional Luo ethos. This marriage is set up for two reasons. One, that her distant cousin, Anyango, who is married to the old man, wants to enhance her status as the first wife, and two, that there is famine in the land and it is assumed that that marriage will save Victoria, then known as Abiero, from the ravaging effects of hunger. Abiero finds that the man is too old to fulfil her sexual needs, and especially her desire for children. She begins an illicit relationship with a fisher-boy who is not Luo and soon becomes pregnant. Knowing and fearing she will be

discovered to have been unfaithful without the consent of the community, (for apparently Luos in the context of the novella's setting allowed women to conceive a child by other men if their husbands were incapable of reproducing), she runs away from her home when her time to deliver is near. On the way she collapses and becomes unconscious in a ditch. A good Samaritan finds her and takes her to a missionary hospital where she delivers a baby girl. She knows that she cannot bear the shame of returning home with an illegitimate child so she escapes from the hospital and runs away again.

With a new identity as Victoria, the name she had been given in the hospital, she finds her way to Kisumu where she meets Chelegat who runs a brothel. Chelegat welcomes Victoria to Kisumu and introduces her to the trade. Interestingly, Victoria finds it easy and fulfilling to engage in prostitution because of her nasty experience in marriage. Unlike marriage, where she was taught to be submissive and sex was more of a duty rather than emotional fulfilment and where she was more of an object than a willing participant, in prostitution she feels liked. When Chelagat dies, Victoria takes over the brothel and transforms it into a successful business. While running the business she spreads her tentacles into politics, helping many opposition political activists such as Wasere to escape from the police and passing on information for and to them. As might be expected, she is arrested, accused of handling stolen property and imprisoned for a three month period. When she comes out of prison, she is unable to re-establish her authority at the brothel because her assistant, Fatima, has taken control of the business. However, Victoria manages to move to Nairobi where civil servants she had helped before now come to her aid and assist her in securing a loan to establish a shop. She dies as a propertied person who bequeaths an inheritance not only to her female descendants but also the male ones. As her name perhaps uncannily suggests, she dies a victor or

victorious. In her name Macgoye marks the confluence of many forces. There is, for example, the word Victor in Victoria which suggests a man, a concept supported by her property and ability to pass it on to her relatives. The name Victoria also infers reference to Queen Victoria which in turn suggests links with a world outside Luo land. Victoria is also the name of the largest fresh water lake in East Africa, Lake Victoria, which is used not only to used define Luos but is also the source of their staple food, fish. And finally there is the concept of victory. In this story therefore Macgoye suggests that Luo women will find total freedom by merging values from within and outside their communities as well as relaxing rigid gender boundaries that have, for generations past, held them down.

Victoria's experience resonates with Macgoye's argument in an interview with me (1998) that the suggestion that African women are "...not decision makers, that they need to be educated or informed by young girls from the University or from America of their rights and duties...is completely false to the picture". In support of this view she suggested that Victoria, who in the nineteen-seventies had managed to amass wealth, run her own business and command respect in society, was representative of real characters identifiable in the society of the day. In *The Present Moment* is Macgoye's attempt to demonstrate that Kenyan women were not only aware of their rights but that they also actively sought to establish them even before the women's movement, as an international system, had taken root in Kenya, is effected through the her choice of characters. Their original home districts are quite revealing. Sophia and Mama Chungu come from the coast. Wairimu and Priscilla are from Central Kenya, while Nekesa and Rahel are from Western Kenya. The choice of the women characters therefore covers the whole of Kenya and each of them is engaged in acts of resistance not just in opposition to colonialism but also to patriarchal systems. Macgoye's connection of

women's activities with historical occurrences in Kenya is also coherent with her suggestion in the interview with me that though she did not have much sympathy with feminism, she did respect that branch of feminism that seeks "...out historical examples of women's writings". In this novel, as in others, Macgoye attempts to locate women in the history of Kenyans' struggle for individual as well collective freedom. The women are engaged in the struggle for corporate freedom as Kenyans as well as their own freedoms as individual women. The fact that the characters in *The Present Moment* overcome their will to suppress their memories and tell the story of their lives is in itself Macgoye's way of celebrating women's victory against self-effacement and inscription as passive victims.

In *Coming to Birth*, Macgoye continues her theme of the parallels between women's struggle for freedom and identity and the emergence of Kenya as an independent nation. The novel opens with Paulina arriving in Nairobi, three months pregnant, to join her husband, Martin Were, who works in a stationary shop. On her first night she begins bleeding and is taken to King George's hospital where she miscarries. The following day she is discharged unceremoniously and not being conversant with the town she gets lost in her attempt to get back to her husband's house in Pumwani. She is arrested and put in prison before being released to the care of an old European woman. When the old European woman finally leads her back home, Were does not believe her story and subjects her to domestic violence and abuse by locking her in the house on a daily basis. At the beginning of the novel, therefore, she is effectively Were's prisoner. In spite of the ill-treatment, she manages to get Were to help her with reading and writing, learns crocheting and eventually convinces him to get her admission to the Home Craft Training School in Kisumu four years after her arrival in Nairobi. She performs very well at the school and is appointed leader of a club near her rural home where her

leadership skills become evident in the success of the club. It is while here that she begins an illicit sexual liaison with Simon, a clerical worker at Kisumu town hall, as a result of which a baby boy, Okeyo, is born. Having failed to mother a child with Were before, this baby brings momentary joy for her, not least because her position among the women of Kano improves as a result of her having become a mother. Unfortunately this baby is killed during riots in Kisumu where Kenyatta's security men unleash violence against demonstrators protesting his involvement with Tom Mboya's assassination. The death of Okeyo so devastates her that Paulina decides to move back to Nairobi as a domestic assistant even though this marks a movement down in social status. This time round Nairobi becomes a refuge from the pains and pressures of the village and "home". The Okello's, whom she goes to work for, move to Mombasa and Paulina is inherited as an employee by Mr and Mrs M. Mr M is a parliamentarian while Mrs M is some kind of a women's liberation activist. I call her some kind of a women's liberation activist because other than address women's meetings at which she loves to use Paulina as an exhibit of the benefits of women's independence as opposed to being married, she achieves very little. She is herself quite happy to play the traditional Luo woman's role in support of her husband. One is left with a feeling that she is in more ways than one like the many so-called gender activists who run non-governmental organisations primarily to make money rather than to improve women's condition in Kenya. It is nevertheless in this house that Paulina finally crystallises her growth from a victim to a victor. By the end of the novel, Paulina has captured the newspaper's headlines by fighting for the rights of street children, has Were living in her house under her terms, and is pregnant with Were's child, this time not as a token to him but as her own chosen and treasured achievement. In the beginning of the novel she was trying to bear children for Were. By the end of it she wants to bear a child for herself and it is up to Were to decide whether that makes him happy or not.

The novel is appropriately titled to suggest that while a new nation is being born so too is a new breed of Kenyan women. Kenya's independence from colonial masters runs parallel to women's independence from a patriarchal hegemony. Like other novels by Macgoye, *Coming to Birth* is presented as a historical novel. The beginning of the novel is set in colonial Kenya in 1956, which is four years after the declaration of a state of emergency in Kenya as an attempt to stem the Mau Mau uprising that sprang up to agitate for freedom. It closes in 1978 with the heroine of the novel, Paulina, expecting a baby after having lost three children. Two of them were lost through miscarriages while the third is the one shot dead by policemen in Kisumu in 1969 during riots against Kenyatta's government. Kenyatta had gone to open a Russian-built wing of Kisumu district hospital three months after Tom Mboya was assassinated. This is an event for which the Luos held Kenyatta personally responsible. In reaction to the stoning of Kenyatta's motorcade, the police reacted by beating up people and in the process Paulina's child was shot dead. Paulina's baby is symbolic of Kenya as a baby nation that Kenyatta's government murders. Although Kenyatta is still alive by the end of the novel, the arrest of Ngugi wa Thiong'o indicates that the people are not satisfied with the leadership of the day and that the struggle for a new, oppression-free nation is still on. If the country is looking for new leadership, new hopes and aspirations, so too is Paulina. It is therefore significant that the novel ends in the same year in which Kenyatta's death, though unmentioned, historically marks the end of an era in Kenya's history. The prospect of a new and better leader runs parallel to the prospects of a new life birth for Paulina as opposed to the miscarriages at the beginning of the novel. It is interesting that in spite of Macgoye's attention to historical details, the death of Kenyatta and Moi's takeover do not feature in her novels even though most of her novels were published after Kenyatta's death. I suspect that this has something to do

with fear of antagonising Moi's government which continued Kenyatta's repression. What is however unmistakable is the close relationship between Paulina's growth into an assertive woman and the emergence of Kenyans, both in colonial and post-colonial eras, who are ready to fight for their rights.

Kenya's progress towards independence runs parallel to Paulina's movement towards individual freedom. Between June and December 1963 when Kenya celebrated both internal self-government and full independence, Paulina had likewise begun twisting the ring on her finger in response to Martin's infidelity, signifying her readiness to break away from his influence. She was already economically independent and teaching many women home craft. It was in fact barely a week after *Uhuru* day when she began her sexual liaison with Simon, heralding her own movement towards liberation from her husband's tyranny and control. Even when Martin Were found out and came home to rain blows on her, "[t]his was not experimental like that long ago beating in Pumwani: both had matured since then and grown apart, so that he rained down his blows more methodically, she *tried to avoid them with the cunning of a now separate and defensible person*" [emphasis mine] (56). Although Paulina does not physically fight back, she is substantially in control of her destiny in comparison to the first time she visits Martin in Nairobi. Kenya's independence does not, however, fulfil all the hopes and desires of the people. Likewise Paulina's apparent freedom, coupled with the birth of her child, which makes her feel that she lacks nothing, soon turns into disillusionment when the baby is killed in the riots. Her disillusionment and struggle therefore run parallel to the disillusionment and consciousness of the need to keep fighting among Kenyans. By this time, many Kenyans such as Martin Shikuku, Chelagat Mutai and others are becoming increasingly critical of the new government, leading to their arrest and imprisonment or detention without trial. By 1975 when J.M. Kariuki is murdered, Paulina's personal

struggles have become so entwined with the national struggle that when Chelegat Mutai, a single lady, is sentenced to thirty months imprisonment for demanding an explanation about the detentions without trial, it so moves Paulina that she begins thinking of mobilising women to protest. She is politically conscious enough to be impatient with women who are only concerned with their domestic affairs and sufficiently gender sensitive for the Mutai case to stir her indignation and “complaints of woman in a man’s world which she had dared not relate to her own commonplace experiences.” (110) “She even over[comes] her usual reticence to the point of shouting at Martin when he [sits] down to eat without showing any particular emotion, on the day the sentence [is] announced” (110), demands they do something and even suggests writing to their MPs, making processions, signing petitions and strikes as possible steps they could take. By the end of the novel, Paulina is no longer a submissive, passive and silent woman but an eloquent, active, gender sensitive revolutionary.

Coming to Birth is about newness and growth. Macgoye uses this novel to mirror and advocate the emergence of a new nation, Kenya, that is free of colonial, neo-colonial and patriarchal dominance. In terms of nationhood, Kenya moves from a state of emergency, which essentially marks the height of slavery and domination, to independence. There is, in effect, the birth of a new nation. The process of birth, however, does not end with independence, as repression continues in the post-colonial era. When the novel ends in January 1978, the concept of newness is still operational as Ngugi wa Thiong’o gets arrested and the people, including Martin who had nearly lost faith in the struggle for a better nation, begin having new hopes for a less oppressive society. Paulina, the heroine of the novel, symbolises the emergence of a new breed of women who are ready to “make what comes and take the best of it” as opposed to “take what comes and make the best of it” (146). The baby she is expecting is indicative of

both newness and hope. It is also an expression of Macgoye's hope for the emergence and embracing of a new free, just and united era in terms of men/women relationships in the context of marriage. Martin and Paulina are now, unlike in the beginning of the narrative, collectively engaged in domestic planning and home is not, in this context, a site for women's silencing, manipulation and control. What is more, home is not the idealised and patriarchal institution whose boundaries are set by cultural space, but a new emerging institution capable of being located and defined outside the ancestral land. Paulina and Martin are establishing home away from home in the sense that they are located in Nairobi and in Paulina's house rather than being in Gem and in Martin's house.

Indeed the concept of home is critically examined and evaluated in this novel in the context of Luo cultural politics as well as Kenyan national politics. Home as a concept, which features prominently in Macgoye's fiction, is very significant in the context of Luo culture. In the Wambui Otieno case, referred to several times in this thesis, a witness who was responding to one of the leading counsel's invitation to provide the Luo definition of a home, had this to say:

This is the place where an uncle or a father takes you to point out where you should build. You go to that place with your wife and first son and put a small structure. Your son builds a small hut called *simba*. You should sleep there with your wife and then it becomes a home (Cohen and Odhimbo 1992, 41).

Okoth Okombo, as quoted by Cohen and Odhiambo (1992) has this to say about the idea of a home as seen from a Luo perspective and in the context of the Wambui Otieno saga:

[H]ere we have the crucial distinction between home as an English word and its Dholuo correlate *dala* or (*pacho*). For the definition of *dala* must of necessity contain an indication of how it comes into being. Since establishing *dala* is a ritual that involves at the very minimum the man who is to be the head of the home, his eldest son, his wife, and his own father (or an appropriate representative from his *anyuola* [minimal lineage]), it cannot be a personal

affair. That is, a man cannot just feel that the building in which he lives is his *dala*. Thus no matter how much one feels at home in a given *ot* (“house”) one cannot just declare it *dala* (“home”) without the appropriate ritual, which is reducible to such essentials as may be prescribed by the consulted elder or elders (42).

What becomes clear here is that for the Luo, the establishment of a home involves a husband, a wife, a child, relatives and land which is almost always ancestral land. Macgoye examines this system of constituting home(s) and interprets it as patriarchal and oppressive to women. She then suggests that women’s concept of home needs to be redefined from their own perspective. This attempt to redefine the concept of home, for women, involves confronting and coming to terms with their own narratives of pain. This can in itself be seen as a kind of a homecoming that is evocative of Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s collection of essays titled *Homecoming : essays on African and Caribbean literature, culture and politics*. Macgoye seems to suggest that women’s method of homecoming involves shunning marriage or negotiating its terms, seeking money, wealth and knowledge, and cultivating cultural as well as economic independence.

Coming to Birth and *Homing In* are the two novels in which Macgoye explores what home means to Kenyan women. The two novels’ development centres around the main women characters’ process of becoming and their search, not for a room they could call their own as in Virginia Woolf’s text, but a place where they can find comfort and peace and which they can call home. In *Coming to Birth*, when Paulina moves from her rural home to Nairobi, she is in search of her husband and therefore ready to make a home. Nairobi for her is a place of promise, but it soon turns out to be a land of violence, suffering, exploitation and deprivation. In this context, her life in Nairobi mirrors the state of the nation under British colonialism. When she arrives in Nairobi in 1956, the state of emergency has already been in place for two years and has become an accepted fact. “Operation Anvil” (8) has been instituted which means that Kenyans, especially

the Kikuyu, have no freedom of movement. When Martin begins to lock her in the house and restrict her movement she becomes his colony, existing for his pleasure, which parallels Kenya's relationship to Britain. She is his prisoner. Home for her, as defined in cultural and patriarchal terms, is a prison and it is this concept that her narrative endeavours to reconstruct and cast from a woman's point of view.

As has already been noted, Luos do not consider a home as culturally constituted unless some rituals, involving man as the head of the family, the wife, children, land and relatives, have been fulfilled. Seven years after his marriage, Martin was still a Luo boy "... whose whole world picture revolved around an idealised 'home' to which he would return in plenty and comfort after making his mark on the big world" (51). Macgoye is critical of the traditional idea of marriage, and the related process of establishing a home, as the grand finale to a woman's life. This is what old women, taken as the custodians of custom, paraded "...as so simple and inevitable that after it there was nothing to tell" (137). Instead Macgoye portrays marriage as marking the beginning of a tumultuous and painful life for the women. Home as a haven of peace is neither found in the rural areas (cultural definition) nor in the urban areas (modern construction). In the first instance, Nairobi brutalises Paulina while back in the rural areas she manages to rise to the level of a teacher and "owner" of a home. While in Nairobi she is virtually a sexual slave, her return to the rural areas coincides with her discovery and establishment of sexual freedom. Although Kisumu is semi-urban at this time, her relations (with people) are rural and the ethics within which she operates are rural. Simon, for example, suggests that she is culturally ethically right in seeking to make a child with someone else if her husband had failed in that obligation. However, while it is in the rural areas that her greatest loss, namely the death of Okeyo occurs, it is in Nairobi that she finds comradeship, with Mrs M and the urchins, and this enables her to find her voice and

ability to articulate her ideas. It is in Nairobi that we realise that her whole life, both in the village and in town, has been a long journey in terms of soul searching. When Martin and Mr M react negatively to her having intervened in a fight between urchins and having been interviewed by the press in consequence of her action, she brushes aside their advice that she should think before acting thus: "I reckon I have had a lot of time for thinking, years and years for it,...And these kids have more thinking-time than is good for them, too. *Its my business who I buy a cup of tea for , and who I give my name to, if it comes to that (139)[emphasis mine]*. Paulina, as Mr M rightly notes, has become a new woman. The emphasis here is that her growth is not a simple consequence of an urban experience, but that this is the result of growth of consciousness in the course of living both in urban and rural areas.

What we see is a Paulina increasingly more at home and comfortable with ideas as well as the environment, not because she is living in either the rural or urban areas but because she is in control. Although she is still living with Martin, he is the one who has moved to her house and is therefore obliged to toe her line rather than make demands. When she gets pregnant with his baby she, against custom, lets him know and he is delighted. It is interesting and perhaps disappointing that she seems ready to be faithful to him without requiring him to reciprocate. Careful examination, however, also suggests that she has divested herself of Martin's influence so much that he is no longer the centre of her life. She has effectively reconstructed motherhood from fulfilment of social demands by women, friends, community or even husband to a self- fulfilling experience. She accepts adulation for her ability to mother but her self- respect and worth is no longer dependent on it. While she does not deny that motherhood is self-fulfilling and that it makes women feel complete, she now constructs it as her own choice and she is ready to pursue the enterprise with or without Martin's support or that

of society. She therefore asserts her right to construct home in her image, retaining all the traditional elements but shifting the control of every one of them to women. Home therefore becomes not a geographical or cultural location but a spatial-temporal location where women find comfort and exercise control. She can therefore consider Nairobi as home and yet see that as simply an extension rather than in opposition to Gem. In many ways this is a woman's expression of the same concept that Cohen and Odhiambo (1989) explore in terms of Luos establishing home away from home. Luos have migrated to other lands outside Kisumu, as evidently manifest in Ogot's *The Promised Land*, and established extensions of their village homes. In Mombasa, for example, there is an area known as *Kisumu ndogo* which simply translates as "little Kisumu".

When Paulina therefore tells Martin:

This is your baby...I hope you will help me to take good care, so that even if one of your safari wives gives you a dozen children still you need not be ashamed of your home in Gem (147).

She is inviting him to a home away from home but one in which he is given the choice of either rejecting or accepting as opposed to his being the one to set the rules and requiring her to obey them. While one may justifiably feel that she ought to have grown strong enough to demand mutual respect, it has to be acknowledged that her concept of home is now significantly different from the patriarchal one.

In *Homing In* as in *The Present Moment*, Macgoye uses memory to further elucidate her motif of women searching for a home. This time around, it involves a white woman and a black Kenyan woman. Ellen, the white lady, is the prism through which we are invited to follow the process of becoming Kenyan and in the process creating a space within which a sense of belonging can be cultivated. Ellen first comes to Kenya to join Jack, her colonial and settler husband at Nakuru. Jack Smith later leaves her in charge of their farm at Nakuru while he goes to work in Kitale. When Jack dies of pleurisy,

Ellen continues in her role as the head of her home which she had already got accustomed to in his absence. In her old age, she is joined by Martha, an old Kikuyu woman and widow, who nurses her through her stroke till she dies. The novel opens with Ellen being pushed around in a wheel chair by Martha and then allows us, through their reminiscences and reveries, to revisit their pasts and see how they had grown to become independent women as well as cultivating a sense of sisterhood. In their search for comfort and in dealing with life's challenges their relationship has shifted from a master-servant relationship to mutual dependence and comradeship.

We learn that the transformation from a Briton to a Kenyan for Ellen has been so complete that she is virtually unknown as the former Miss Mountford who grew up, studied, and even taught in England in the early twentieth century. In Kenya she is only known as Mrs Smith. This does not so much mark her deference to Mr Smith and hence her loss of identity as an individual woman as it does her "Kenyanisation" and alienation from Europe. She hardly understands her former country's politics. Margaret Thatcher, for example means nothing to her and she does not "understand how the E.E.C had superseded Commonwealth preference" (9). This is in contrast to her first arrival in Kenya when, even though it was some kind of a homecoming, being the first place she was attempting to run a family of her own, there was a sense of foreboding. Although her first impressions of Kenya are a shade better than what she had heard in Britain, where the emphasis had been the jungle, lions, leopards, ticks, jiggers and other kinds of wild animals, plus diseases such as typhoid and sleeping sickness, it is not until her first return visit to Britain that she discovers the extent of her alienation from the country of her birth as well as her deep sense of awareness that Kenya is home. While it is true that she still cannot mourn the dead as Africans do and no sense of epiphany

exists between her and them, there is nevertheless a growth of understanding between them.

This growth of understanding is such that Ellen now feels more in control in an African environment than in an English environment. The process of being decentred from Europe and becoming centred in Africa primarily takes the form of the loss of parents on both sides of her family, her parents as well as her parents-in-law, and the death or marriage of brothers and sisters. The bombing in the second world war and the consequent reconstruction of Britain also means that both the cultural and physical terrain changes a great deal in her absence. By the time Kenya attains her independence, and many Europeans are running scared and returning "home" to Europe, Ellen not only cannot imagine leaving but she is sure that Kenya is where she belongs. Kenya has become so much of her home that she counters the myth of Africa as the periphery of the world and declares it as a centre in its own right among a multiplicity of other centres. Writing to her former student, Lilly, who is now a women's rights activist and a celebrity, she says: "We do not actually feel that we live in the back of beyond - everywhere is dead centre for somebody - and I hope having a home in Kenya to refer back to will help your perspective on women's rights" (163). That, in my opinion, marks her shift from Eurocentric to an Afrocentric perspective. Ellen is not legally Kenyan, has not yet completely detached herself from her European background or become attached to any specific Kenyan ethnic culture and still needs work permits but she is, in the context of a multi-racial Kenya, which Macgoye constantly emphasises in her texts, culturally Kenyan. The suggestion is that a new cultural home is emerging that is multi-racial and conducive to women. This is especially reflected in the bonding and mutual growth that has taken place between Martha and Ellen such that even

linguistically, they neither speak English or Kiswahili, but had rather developed “our own kind of home language, a bit of this and a bit of that” (173).

Homing In's feminist consciousness is closely related to Macgoye's reworking of the concept of home. The feminist consciousness expressed is also Afrocentric because Macgoye constantly assesses women's condition and struggle for independence, equality and justice within the context of the experience of African women. Indeed, she openly challenges western conceptions of African women as apolitical, silent, submissive and oppressed. She believes that as much as women occupy a less privileged status than men in most African societies, they are not mainly men's victims but more often than not, men and women face common and mutual problems. However, she does acknowledge that there are crucial instances when patriarchy, universally, oppresses women.

Macgoye employs one such instance, the use of a patriarchal legal system to deny the vote to English women, to mark Ellen's sixteenth year. By using the year to mark Ellen's life and background, Macgoye not only celebrates the victory of the suffragettes but also acknowledges the pervasive nature of sexism both in Europe and Africa. In the course of the novel we learn that at a certain time in Britain, married women, especially those from rich families, were not allowed to work even when they had no children of their own. In Kenya women, especially Kikuyu women in the context of this novel, endured hard work carrying *ciondos* (bags), lifted heavy loads that no man on the farm could equal, as well as enduring child-birth that was made especially difficult by their having been circumcised, and had twisted backs caused by hard labour. The introduction of modern education also discriminated against them because boys were

given the first chances of education and when the girls were sent to school, it was with the intention of making sure that they fetched a higher dowry.

Although Ellen and other women characters in this novel, except Lilly Beach, do not engage in militant opposition to these oppressions, there is formed a sense of sisterhood that cuts across races in Kenya. Ellen for example, having left teaching after the birth of her children, is persuaded to go back because this time girls are allowed into the school and she feels she wants to nurture them and give them a chance. It is this sense of sisterhood that makes Ellen and Jack react differently to the report of two thousand women in Fort Hall, now Murang'a, having marched to the DCs office to complain about terracing. While Jack thinks the event marks the beginning of a revolution which is in bad taste, Ellen feels it is magnificent, brings it up in her class and raises it up with her female domestic servant. This sense of sisterhood finds explicit expression in the words of Sister O'Brien who while recommending Martha to Ellen says "I've got the perfect help for you, Mrs Smith, and a good thing you will be doing for Kenyan womanhood if you give her a helping hand" (125). That help is in reality in reference to Lillian, Martha's daughter and who has passed her intermediate exams, and been offered a high school place but whose widowed mother has no way of raising the fees. Lillian is for Kenyan womanhood what Lilly is for English womanhood - a deviation from an oppressive norm. Lilly goes through two divorces, suggesting a rejection of the confines of marriage, bears no children, indicating refusal to be pinned down by what she calls strings of babies, and spends her time flying from one country to another to champion women's rights. Lillian does not follow the same path and indeed marries and bears children, but in the context of her cultural background she too represents changing womanhood. She has an education, does not get circumcised, no dowry is paid for her and she marries outside her ethnic group and physically relocates to England. The two

are important in understanding Macgoye's views about the progress and nature of women's politics because both are in a way, Mrs Smith's "children". Indeed when close to her death, Mrs Smith cannot tell the difference between Lillian and her daughter Angela and considers Lilly her first daughter. They are therefore an extension and improvement of herself. This is Macgoye's way of pointing to the kind of future she envisages for women, a future where women shall be free to choose. This the right that both Lillian and Lilly Beach have exercised in their different patterns of life.

Macgoye's attitude towards what Lilly Beach has made of her life as opposed to Mrs Smith's achievement is somewhat ambivalent, though it leans more toward admiration. She feels that Lilly has had a more fulfilling life than Mrs Smith because even though Lilly has missed "[t]he pride of motherhood, the family praise" and "the tumble and caress of small things at play..." (168) she feels complete. On the other hand, Mrs Smith, who has become "a mother of two, grandmother of two, widow of one, teacher of thousands [feels] by no means complete" (168). However, Macgoye hastens to warn us that Mrs Smith is under no illusions that a post-marital romance or a more glamorous career would have completed her. Her fulfilment lies in her children who include biological as well as non-biological ones such as Lillian and Lilly Beach. Macgoye is in effect suggesting that happiness for women is found neither in careers, families or a combination of the two but in the fulfilment that one finds in whatever one chooses to do. It is disappointing that Lillian's psychology is never really explored as she is a married career woman, but the impression created is that she is fairly happy and fulfilled but, and this seems to be Macgoye's clean bill of health to feminism, Lilly's happiness is never held suspect. In essence, she is suggesting that an active pursuit of freedom for women, which I read as feminism, is fulfilling and worth while.

Although Macgoye postulates an Afrocentric feminist interpretation of history in representing women's history as narratives of pain and questioning and reconstructing the concept of home, her Afrocentricity is even more pronounced in three more areas that I would like to turn to now. First she demonstrates that for most women in Africa, black or white, family and career are not necessarily or even primarily in opposition to each other. Women do not have to choose between career and raising families. Careerism for them is more a matter of bread and butter rather than self-esteem, actualisation, and freedom. Indeed the situation is much more austere than that. Writing to Lilly who is planning to come to Kenya to see her and carry out some interviews to assess the condition of women there, Ellen writes, "Probably most Kenyan women are preoccupied with bread and not butter, without a thought of jam. Girls education had (sic) forged ahead, but there isn't much time to speculate on sexual equality, let alone fantasy" (164). This suggests that to Africans, some of western feminism's concerns are more of fantasy than concrete issues touching on real day-to-day requirements for African women. It is interesting that when I asked her whether she thought there were problems that were specific to women and which women should be particularly concerned about she had this to say:

Well, there is a major problem, I mean this is so obvious. I am saying it all the time, the major problem is that we obviously admit that two hundred children die of preventable causes every day. And that two hundred is probably a very low estimate. It seems to me that any normal woman should wake up in the morning remembering this, any woman who has undertaken that enormous enterprise of having children, and this essentially should be a matter of deliberate choice, should be asking herself every morning, am I really able to do this and please God help. If I have to be employed or in some other need, am I going to, in any way, diminish the childhood that these children have a right to expect? Please show me what to do about it. This to me is completely overriding.

This may seem to suggest that Macgoye is suggesting that children are women's responsibility in Africa. However, a careful reading of her novels suggests that in fact she thinks child rearing in Africa has been very much a collective responsibility that

extends across gender and society as a whole and that this is the ideal. However, because men are nearly always away from home trying to earn money for the family, it is women who bear the brunt of the responsibility for bringing up children and bear the blame when things go wrong. A good example is Martha and her husband Njogu, whose hazardous lorry driving job leads to his early death at the hands of gangsters. Before his death, Njogu brings money and food to his wife and considers his children well taken care of, only to come and find one of his sons with dwindled legs and a protruding stomach suggesting kwashiorkor. He slaps Martha once in ignorance of the fact that she would not have been able to merely feed her own children while “sunken eyes watched everything that came in and pestered you for a share of what remained” (70). In other words, Martha was mother not only to her biological children but also to other children in the village and therefore found it impossible not to share what her husband only intended for his biological children. Rather than repudiate motherhood or struggle for the right to work rather than make homes or alternatively to make homes rather than work, Macgoye’s women instead combine motherhood, work and resistance.

Indeed, as the women of Murang’a demonstrate, their right to motherhood becomes their basis for resistance. In supporting them against forced terracing by the colonialists, Ellen argues that the women, rather than be forced into formal work, paid or unpaid, should have been left alone to take care of their homes, babies and gardens. Rather than lower a woman’s status in an African society, children elevate women. This phenomenon is reflected among the Luo by Paulina’s experience in *Coming to Birth*. In *Homing In*, Macgoye argues that married Kikuyu women had their “crowns shaved and shiny to show that they had married children and were of an age to give counsel” (87). This is Macgoye’s way of suggesting that Afrocentric feminism does not view motherhood as always or even primarily an encumbrance but as a source of

empowerment or as a source of inspiration for empowerment. The argument here is not that African women are not weighed down or even prevented from full self-actualization by motherhood, but a suggestion that African women may not necessarily employ the same tools of discourse as western feminists in addressing their own concerns. The idea of motherhood as empowering is an interesting view since it contrasts sharply with Macgoye's view of marriage. Although Jack and Ellen had lead a relatively conflict free marriage life, when Jack dies Ellen feels "at last unencumbered" (147). Marriage is interpreted as confinement suggesting imprisonment and therefore loss of freedom. Macgoye suggests that marriage for women means dispossession and is therefore parallel to the state of emergency declared by the colonialists in 1952. Images of marriage as prison, confinement, disruption, dispossession and other debilitations run throughout Macgoye's fiction.

In *Victoria*, for example, prostitution is shown as more empowering than marriage. Prostitution is shown not as a vice but a wilfully chosen career and a form of resistance to the oppressive strictures of marriage. Marriage is compared to the bondage of sin from which women have to be redeemed, just as Christians are redeemed from sin by Christ. Although Macgoye does not advocate the abolition of the marriage institution, she does seem to suggest that women are better off outside of the institution. While it is possible for women to be married and successful, they need to resist or step outside the marriage institution in order to experience self-fulfilment. Paulina of *Coming to Birth* has to leave her husband in order to find her fullest self-expression. Victoria has to run away from her husband in order to improve her economic status, and the one woman who feels complete, Lilly Beach, has to divorce twice to sustain her status as a free woman. I am not suggesting that Macgoye is calling for the dismantling, or even the

rejection, of marriage, but that she suggests that the best form of marriage is one in which man is not the centre of the universe.

The third way in which Macgoye's feminism is explicitly Afrocentric is in her attitude toward African customs such as female circumcision, wife inheritance, and polygamy. In regard to female circumcision for example, it is instructive to note that although she is clearly in opposition to the practice, she never refers to it as female genital mutilation, a term which in my opinion suggests senseless, brutal, savage and pointless hacking of women's genitalia. She does not view it as a practice designed by patriarchy to exercise control on women's sexuality as most Eurocentric literature seems to mirror the ritual. As a matter of fact Macgoye (1994) suggests that irresponsible opposition to the practice in Kenya caused more harm than good as women ended up being "...savagely cut on a tirade of reaction" (52). In *Homing In*, Martha, for example, goes through the practice at the insistence of her mother and to the chagrin of her father. In her mother's opinion, circumcision prepares girls for marriage, enhances female power in the land as it binds women together as age mates, and also forges unity between the younger and older women. This view of seeing women as largely responsible for female circumcision was echoed much more strongly by Margaret Ogola (1998) in an interview with me. She argued that FGM "...was a women's thing, it was a sister thing, women did it to each other to prepare themselves". Rather than oppose the ritual by branding it barbaric, retrogressive, savage and brutish, Macgoye rather argues that the ritual has outlived its purpose. Her stance is that the struggle for independence rendered the practice non-effective as it could no longer bind girls to their village and community since this role had been taken over by the freedom oath.

Unlike the early missionaries, Macgoye does not think that religion should have been the basis of opposition to female circumcision as was the case in Ngugi's *The River Between*. This stance is reflected in Martha's refusal to have her daughter Lillian circumcised. When old village women come sniffing and making innuendoes to the effect that Lillian should submit to the ritual, Martha's refusal is not based on a Eurocentric conception of the ritual as being unchristian or as being carried out by old, rough and unhygienic women. At this time, the "circumciser herself was not some antique skin-clad figure but possibly handled your money in the market or scrubbed floors in the Town Hall" (Macgoye 1994, 127). Martha's refusal is based on the rationale that "the whole hugger mugger was unnecessary and unhealthy" (127). In reflection to her own experience, she argues that in a world that had "...so much unnecessary pain in it," it is absurd that one "should inflict some extra pain just for the hell of it" (52). She feels that Lillian being a fatherless girl in a new world should be left to live and "discover the rules as she went along" (127). Female circumcision in Macgoye's view should therefore be eradicated first because it is unnecessary and unhealthy, and secondly because it now serves no purpose as it can no longer effectively bind women to women and to their villages and communities. Macgoye's approach is Afrocentric, in my view, primarily because it seeks to understand the practice in context. Secondly, and arising from this primary reason, because it is not culturally arrogant, condescending, or patronising. And thirdly because it exonerates neither men nor women in apportioning blame for the practice.

Polygamy is another institution that Macgoye examines from an Afrocentric perspective. In most Eurocentric literature, polygamy is seen as oppressive to women as it means men have more sex than women. Polygamy is therefore seen as a patriarchal institution designed to take care of men's sexual needs. Another interpretation of

polygamy is as commodifying women in the sense that they become a reflection of a man's wealth. And thirdly that polygamy enhances male power as the more women a man has the greater is his empire to rule. Fourthly, western Christian missionaries mirror polygamy as an indicator of how far Africans are far from God. In other words polygamy is a violation of God's commandments or is indicative of a people without God. Macgoye, herself once a missionary, takes a different approach, though clearly in favour of monogamy. She does not interpret polygamy as a source of conflict for women in and of itself. Polygamy is taken for granted in her texts and the women or men involved in them do not seem to experience any more conflict than those in monogamous marriages. On the contrary polygamy seems to give women a chance for solidarity and comradeship. In *Chira*, women in polygamous relationships as well as those married to brothers refer to each other as, "my sister-in-law", as well as, "my co-wife" (53). In *Victoria*, polygamy is actually arranged in the false conviction that it would be beneficial both to Victoria and to her distant cousin. When Victoria runs away from the mission and leaves a daughter behind, one of her co-wives ends up taking the child in and bringing her up. Secondly, though ascribing significance to the role of Christianity in the reduction of polygamous families, Macgoye suggests that changing socio-economic forces have led or are leading many Africans to abandon the practice of their own accord.

Macgoye argues that traditionally Luo women approved of polygamy because it empowered them. The senior wife took the title of *Mikaye* while the junior one was referred to as *Nyachira*. These titles were not merely names but also descriptive of office. By virtue of her being the senior wife, *Mikaye* assumed new powers not only vis-à-vis *Nyachira* but also vis-à-vis her husband. The husband would no longer make any major decisions without telling her. She was relieved of many hard household tasks

which were passed over to the new wife. This scenario is most explicit in *Chira*. In this novel polygamy is explored using Assistant Minister Mac'Owour who in a politically inspired conspiracy is declared bankrupt and hence sacked from his cabinet post. It is then that we learn that he has two wives, Justina and Evangeline, plus several other girlfriends among whom are Njoki, Adhiambo and Janet. I am here concerned with the relationship between Evangeline, the *Mikaye* and Justina, the *Nyachira*. First, Evangeline uses polygamy to evade tasks that she considers distasteful. She concedes that she could tolerate Justina because Justina "...was respectful and accepted the tedious engagements Evangeline did not care for" (100). She also takes advantage of polygamy to deal with her menopause as is reflected in the following quote:

Evangeline had early closed off the husband's mandatory alternating visits by declaring herself infertile. *This made her smile sometimes: monogamous sisters-in-law were always trying to evade the approach of menopause, attributing hot flushes to malaria or the use of an electric iron* (100-101). [Emphasis mine]

It is important to stress that this does not mean that Evangeline was happy with Mac'Owuor as a husband. In fact, because of undisclosed pains that he apparently had caused her she barely stopped short of divorcing him. The point I am making is that polygamy worked in her favour, and that because Justina was willing to play second fiddle the relationship was relatively conflict free. For her part, although Justina "...had forgotten about the grand passion, ... she got plenty of attention and the competition [meaning Evangeline] kept out of her way" (102). She therefore had no reason to be competitive in her relationship with Evangeline. It seems to me fair to conclude that the age differences between the two women, with Evangeline being beyond child bearing age and Justina being young and in her prime, served to reduce the sense of competition. This is in contrast to Justina and Adhiambo who was only a mistress but Justina's age mate. Justina argues that "[s]he felt a bit sorry for Evangeline, who had ideas ahead of her time. But she was afraid of Adhiambo, who soured and seethed and

might possess or invent the means to discredit them all” (102). It is clear that had Mac’Owour been in a polygamous relationship between Adhiambo and Justina, the conflicts in the marriage would have been much more tumultuous. I am suggesting that in *Evangeline*, Justina and Adhiambo is a representation of the changing nature and function of the institution of polygamy.

This changing nature is explained away in *Victoria*. Macgoye argues that polygamy was especially undermined in the nineteen thirties and forties when tables were turned so that *Nyachira* became the privileged one. “The new wife was no longer taking her proper place in the household as Victoria had done when Anyango sent for her all those years ago” (54). Instead:

[S]he would be the one who got new dresses and housekeeping money, she would be the one whose children, belonging to a later and luckier generation, would get into high schools, and she would be the one who appeared in Christmas staff dinner and had her photograph in the paper as the sophisticated years rolled on (54).

This meant that the status of “the junior wife became a prize worth having and for this hundreds of little girls hung around bars and offices of great men...” (54). At the same time first wives began to feel that their positions “needed to be guarded against intruders” (54). While polygamy traditionally helped the first wives enhance their position in the family, modernity means that a second wife threatens the position of the first wife. It is in this context that Macgoye understands the modern woman’s opposition to polygamy rather than that the institution was inherently oppressive to women. Victoria, for example, who is Macgoye’s example of a progressive, independent-minded and liberated woman, never ceases to inquire about her daughter’s co-wife. Lois, her daughter who married as a second wife, becomes infuriated by her mother’s inquiries. Her feeling is that her mother has failed to make a transition into the twentieth century where marriage is for good once and for all and where there is no

room for co-wives. The two women's positions in reference to polygamy can be understood in the context of changing roles of women in the institution. Victoria, though the more independent minded and stronger of the two, finds nothing wrong with polygamy because her mindset is traditional, while her daughter feels threatened by the institution because she knows that in modern times a second wife diminishes rather than enhances her power. Polygamy has ceased to be co-operative and has instead become competitive.

Macgoye's criticism of African culture is especially appealing because one senses her awareness of the need for what Nnaemeka (1997a) calls a writer's or critic's cultural literacy of his/her target community. For Macgoye the target community is the Luo, and she demonstrates in her fiction that she is aware and mindful of "cultural imperatives and shifts" (Nnaemeka 1997a, 1) among the Luo. This makes it plain to see that she operates, to borrow from Nnaemeka (1995) once again, as an in/outsider vis-à-vis Luo culture. By an in/outsider, Nnaemeka means someone who, though not indigenous to a particular community, has cultivated such cultural literacy as to be incapable of being arrogantly dismissive of other people's cultural values only on the basis of his/her own cultural prisms. In my opinion, Macgoye has done much more than just acquire Luo cultural literacy, she has become enculturated. However, as she suggested in her interview with me, her British background and missionary training and vocation also impact on her writings. It is interesting, for example, that her fiction is without the cruel European masters and colonialists or deceptive and hypocritical missionaries such as are found in Ngugi's novels.

Macgoye's feminism does not posit women's struggle for freedom as pitting them against men. In her novels there are no tensions between men and women whose

genesis or foundation is gender. There is no militancy or bitterness against men or any celebration of men's misfortunes such as happens in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. However there is an acute awareness of women coming up against oppressive social forces whose strength lies in the fact that they are sanctioned by both men and women. I am not here suggesting that Macgoye does not hold men responsible for some of the misfortunes that befall women. I am rather suggesting that she argues that there are ways in which African men and women face largely similar problems, but that being yoked with men militates against women's capacity to make the best of those problematic situations. She suggests that in order for women to find the fullest expression of their potential it is important that they sever those relationships that bind them to men, of which marriage is the worst culprit. This view becomes very pronounced if we pay attention to the state and condition of men in the lives of Macgoye's successful or powerful women. The men are conspicuous by their absence in the lives of those women. In *Homing In* Jack is taken away from home to engage in the second world war in order that Mrs Smith may learn the art of managing a farm and being head of her home. Mwangi also goes to war before coming back only to be arrested and detained, so that his wife gets to not only run the home but also establish a successful family business. Victoria argues that her engagement or involvement with many men, as opposed to being tied down to one of them, gave her lee-way to become independent. This is the same argument that Macgoye seems to extend to polygamy but in reverse order. Polygamy seems to enable women to focus more on themselves than on their men. It is disappointing that she does not zero in on any one single polygamous family as she does with monogamy in *Coming to Birth*, where marriage becomes so oppressively confining that Paulina has to break free from the institution in order to find the full expression of her humanity. What, however, is not in doubt is that Macgoye feels that unlike motherhood, marriage imprisons and limits women's potential. It seems

that it is only her Christian ethics that make her stop short of advocating the abolition of the institution.

In the context of the issues discussed in this chapter, it is evident that Macgoye's activism does not neatly fall into any of the categories of feminism discussed in chapter two. Indeed some critics may be tempted to label her reactionary because of the way her women never seem to want to confront men in and of themselves as representatives of patriarchy. I suggest, however, that her reconstruction of Kenya's history in terms of women's narratives of pain and her call for the re-invention of the concept of home suggest liberal feminism. Her art in fact is akin to gyno-criticism in the way in which it attempts to foreground activities of women in history to demonstrate that rather than having been passive they were in fact major contributors to historical events. Her liberal feminism is also evident in the way she calls for the jettisoning of cultural practices such as female circumcision, polygamy and wife inheritance without suggesting that these practices were of no benefit traditionally. Like a liberal feminist she seems to suggest that these institutions and practices ought to change as part of the process of modifying society as necessitated by changing social and economic realities.

Chapter Six

Beyond Colour: The Euro-Afrocentric Debate

"Let us stop the reductionism falsity which attempts to define cultural realities along purely colour lines".

Wole Soyinka (1995) in *The African world and the ethnocultural debate*.

This chapter, besides being the last, is the most contentious. In it I suggest that both Tsitsi Dangarembga and Alice Walker, though black, espouse Eurocentric views in their novels *Nervous Conditions* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. I then submit that Rebeka Njau's and Margaret Ogola's texts, *Ripples in the Pool* and *The River and the Source* respectively, articulate an Afrocentric perspective and explore what are the crucial differences in approach between these novels. For purposes of clarity, I think it is necessary to restate some issues that have been recurring in this thesis. First, that Afrocentricity or Eurocentricity is not a matter of colour. Secondly, that these two views are not interpreted in terms of progressive/retrogressive or inferior/superior or even better/worse but rather as simply two different culturally constructed ways of representing observed reality. Thirdly, that though a writer can and should indeed be judged in terms of the totality of his or her works, it is also possible for the writer to express a Eurocentric perspective in one text and an Afrocentric perspective in another. A good example is Ngugi wa Thiong'o, who by his own judgement, says that all his texts which were originally written in English were actually not African literature. In essence Ngugi is suggesting that his real African texts are those that he has written first and foremost in Kikuyu. It is beyond the scope of this project to assess Ngugi's convictions, but suffice it to say that although I acknowledge the value and power of language as a carrier of culture, I believe that the Africanness of a text is contained in much more than just language. I suggest that the consciousness and the values advocated in a text, as well as the perspectives taken vis-à-vis the issues in it, determine whether or not the text is Eurocentric or Afrocentric. It is within this context that I want

to examine the four texts to demonstrate that Dangarembga and Walker are both Eurocentric, at least in the chosen texts, while Njau and Ogola are Afrocentric.

A few more things need to be said before the actual analysis of the texts. The choice of Walker and Dangarembga needs explanation or justification because they are both non-Kenyan. Walker is an African-American born in Georgia, USA, in 1944. Born to a poor family of sharecroppers, Walker was blinded in one eye by her brother while playing a game of cowboy-and-Indians with toy guns bought for her brothers by her parents in 1952. This blinding caused her psychological trauma when it led to her being ostracised because of the scar left by the injury. In an attempt to deal with loneliness she turned to writing. In *Warrior Masks*, she likens that blinding to FGM. *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, which is about the physical and psychological scars left by FGM, is related to Kenya because it is set within East Africa and Walker has given hints that Kenya is one of the possible locations of the text. In the introductions to *Possessing the Secret of Joy* and *Warrior Masks*, she reveals that the novel and her interest in female circumcision are inspired by her experience in or of Kenya. In the Introduction to *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she argues that Tashi, the main character, was inspired by a Kenyan girl who acted in the movie based on her novel *The Colour Purple*. *Warrior Masks*, though written out of material collected mainly from Gambia and other Western African countries, is Alice Walker's way of following up on the ritual of female circumcision, or female genital mutilation as she prefers to call it, after having heard Kenyans "whispering" (Walker 1993, xiv) about it while helping to construct schools in rural Kenya. She also reveals that her specific concern with FGM was re-ignited by Joy Adamson's 1966 anthropological book, *The Peoples of Kenya*, which "describe[s] the ritual in blood-chilling detail" (xv). There is therefore, in my opinion, enough justification to interrogate her text against the works of Kenya women writers.

Dangarembga, on the other hand, was born in 1949 in what is now Zimbabwe, then colonial Rhodesia, but spent her formative years in England while her parents pursued further studies from 1961 to 1965. Back in Rhodesia she studied in a mission school and an American convent before moving back to England, and specifically Cambridge, to study medicine. She found living in England so frustrating that she abandoned her studies and returned to Rhodesia where she eventually took a degree in psychology. *Nervous Conditions*, whose heroine, just like Dangarembga, also accompanies her parents to England at a tender age and subsequently attends a missionary school before proceeding to a convent, is very similar to Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* in terms of gender politics. Dangarembga, in interview with Veit-Wild (1995), reveals her admiration for black American women writers and their approach to gender issues. One of the blurbs on the cover of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is Alice Walker's praise of the novel as a classic African text, suggesting that Walker and Dangarembga share similar ideas. The two novels borrow heavily from Jungian and Freudian psychology and resistance is key to both plots. While there may be no direct link between *Nervous Conditions* and Kenya, the issues it raises are relevant to the country and its people as well as to the wider implications of this thesis. The novel is set among the Shona, who appear to bear a close relationship, linguistically and culturally speaking, to the Kikuyu of Kenya. For example the names Babamunini and Babamukuru which appear in the text are also to be found among the Kikuyu, though spelt as two words, as terms of respect to refer to older and younger brothers to a child's father respectively. *Nervous Conditions* is also undoubtedly one of the few African texts, written by a woman, that is widely critiqued in western discourses, hence an excellent choice while interrogating Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity. Its approach to women's politics is also radically different from works by such writers as

Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ogot and others in the way it singularly focuses on patriarchy.

My argument that Eurocentricity and Afrocentricity do not suggest qualitative assessments also needs to be qualified. First, I admit that Afrocentricity can at times be severely limited and myopic when it comes to evaluating rituals on the continent that may be inconsistent with modernity and changing social realities. In such circumstances, Afrocentrics may be tempted to come to the defence of customs and traditions that really need to be expunged. At the same time, Eurocentricity sometimes reeks of cultural arrogance and bigotry when it comes to evaluating rituals in Africa and the third world. This especially happens when critics refuse to cultivate some cultural literacy in their target communities or a sense of in/outsiderness. In other circumstances, however, and I submit this is the case in the texts studied in this chapter, the difference between Eurocentricity and Afrocentricity is not in the conclusions but in the attitude and approach to the issues at hand. I am going to demonstrate, for instance, that Rebeka Njau and Alice Walker are both agreed that female circumcision should be discontinued but that they differ in their interpretation of the forces that sustain its continuance. The four women are agreed that women have had a raw deal in Africa, but while Walker and Dangarembga lay the entire blame on retrogressive African cultural practices sustained by patriarchy, and to a lesser extent colonialism in Dangarembga's case, and in which women are victims, Njau and Ogola represent a much more dynamic society in which women are victims but also to certain extent the aggressors against other women as well as against men. This is in spite of the fact that Walker and Dangarembga display a much more polished artistic finesse than Njau and Ogola. I propose to demonstrate that while Walker and Dangarembga represent African customs

and traditions as largely disempowering to women, Njau and Ogola see the institutions as potentially empowering if utilised and interpreted in their proper cultural contexts.

I begin with Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* because besides Walker being the only non-continental African discussed in this thesis, her text deals with the most controversial subject, female genital mutilation (FGM), which is also referred to as female circumcision. In *Warrior Masks* Walker argues that it is inaccurate to call the ritual female circumcision but that the more apt description is female genital mutilation. In my opinion, therein lies one of the first indications of her Eurocentricity. Mutilation as Greer (1999) has correctly observed "suggests savage initiation customs surviving in darkest Africa, as in January 1997 when the women's secret Bondo society entered the Grafton camp for displaced persons in the eastern suburbs of Freetown, Sierra Leone, and removed the clitorises from 600 women without anaesthetic or antiseptics" (94). One cannot deny that this incident amounted to savage mutilation because it was violent, intrusive, unwanted and an abuse of human rights. There is no other way to interpret any forceful circumcision under any circumstance. That is precisely the problem with labelling female circumcision FGM. It demonstrates a clear lack of understanding of the ritual because it criminalises the practice. Greer (1999) is therefore correct when she argues that "looked at in its full context, the criminalization of FGM can be seen to be what African nationalists since Jomo Kenyatta have been calling it, an attack on cultural identity" (95). Force was not and is not ordinarily part of the ritual in any of the African societies that I have had the opportunity to study. Admittedly the girls might undergo the ritual when they are less than eighteen years old and may therefore be deemed too young to make an informed decision about the ritual, but that is not any different from sixteen year olds in western countries being deemed old enough to choose their sexuality. As a matter of fact and logically speaking, if age justifies the

word mutilation, then the 60-70% of infant male babies circumcised in U.S are mutilated (Greer, 1999, 95).

To be fair to Walker, she does extend her meaning of mutilation to other practices such as breast implants, extending of hair by African-Americans, nose, navel, penis, vagina and other organ studs as well as other cosmetic surgery. However, the novel in question and *Warrior Masks* are both devoted to FGM. As a writer, Walker has every right to discourse on any subject of her choice from whichever perspective she desires. However it appears to me essential that she should remain truthful to the social and historical realities she chooses to (re)present for us. Her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is fundamentally flawed, in spite of its narrative brilliance, because Walker fails to cultivate that vital sense of in/outsiderness. It is this failure, I think, that led Opportune Zongo, to declare, in reference to *Warrior Masks* that “as an African woman, I found most annoying Walker’s utter ignorance of African cultures and her arrogant, disrespectful, and insulting telling of our story. The book was nothing short of a compilation of condescending remarks about Africa and Africans” (Zongo 1996, 178). In many ways this same accusation can be levelled against *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

In this novel, Walker follows the tribulations and sufferings of Tashi and her eventual identity crisis that is compounded by bouts of neurosis caused by her having undergone FGM. When the novel opens, Walker presents a typical Africa-West encounter characteristic of colonialist literature. The opening of the novel is told from Olivia’s perspective as she remembers her first encounter with Tashi. Tashi, the African girl, becomes the object of Olivia’s western gaze. She (Tashi) is presented crying and covered with so much dust that the “tears [make] a track through the dust on her face” (7). Olivia, her brother Adam and their parents have just arrived in the village of Olinka

as missionaries. These missionaries have risked their lives, having left the comfort of America, “through jungle, grass land, across rivers and whole countries of animals” (7) to bring the good word, civilisation in other words, to the people of Olinka. The crying Tashi is not only a symbol of sadness but also and more importantly, a symbol of a repressed and therefore silenced creature almost bursting with the effort to contain her grief in a community where she is not allowed self-expression. Indeed she is so obscure at first that the only sign of her “is a small dark hand and arm like that of a monkey, reaching round her mother’s lower body” (7). At this early stage in the novel and the family’s missionary journey, Olivia’s father sets their objective and therefore that of the text as finding out why Tashi is crying. In the course of the narrative, we discover that Tashi was crying because she had been told that her sister had bled to death. What she had not been told, and what we learn much later in the text, is that her sister had bled to death after FGM.

The power of *Possessing the Secret of Joy* lies in its narrative structure. Walker employs multiple narrative voices as well as time shifts to withhold and reveal information in a way that makes her employment of the theory of psycho-analysis very effective. As soon as Tashi’s grief is introduced, the narrative voice shifts from Olivia in the past to Tashi in the present. She is before a “white witch doctor” (10) who scribbles on a piece of paper while goading Tashi to search in her psyche to locate the origin of her psychosis. The two are therefore engaged in a session of psychoanalysis. They are reminiscent of Freud and Dora. The rest of the text shifts in terms of time, location and perspective through the employment of different characters as the narrative voices. The centrepiece of all the narrative voices, however, is Tashi. Through the multiple narrative voices, we learn that she had chosen FGM, at a mature age, in an attempt to stamp her authenticity as an Olinkan and in spite of advice to the contrary by Adam and Olivia,

and that the ritual had gone awfully wrong, almost leading to her death. When Adam finally traces her in a camp being attended to by M'Lissa, an old Olinkan traditional mid-wife, surgeon and healer who had infibulated her, Tashi has scars on her face, her legs are bound and her vagina has been sewn together with thorns with a straw inserted to stop the flesh from sealing her vaginal opening completely and to allow the flow of urine and menstrual fluids. As a result she is clumsy in her evacuation processes, part of her flesh is rotting and she stinks. Walker makes it explicit that no amount of cleaning in Africa is able to remove that odour. It has to wait until Adam and Tashi relocate to America. In other words Africa is to bad odours as America is to cleanliness.

There is constantly in this text, a deliberate opposition between Africa and America/Europe. Africa is the land of disease, poverty, grief, mutilation and intolerance. Europe and America on the other hand symbolise healing, acceptance, joy, plenty, light, civilisation and restoration. In order for Tashi's healing to be effective she has to relocate to America and Europe as well as to sever her relationship with her African family to the extent of considering Adam and Olivia as her only family. Through Adam, Walker leaves no doubt that Africans, in order to be truly free, should aspire to acquire European and Western culture. Writing to Lissette, his French woman lover, this is how Adam represents Tashi's experience of Zurich where an old psychoanalyst, fondly referred to as Mzee, was trying to cure Tashi:

As you suggested, the fact that I am here with her, and that this is an isolated and beautiful sport, seems to calm her. She is sometimes merry just at the sight of him, and thinks of him, I believe, as a kind of Santa Claus. As such he is another representative of the *exotic Western and European culture she so adores* (72) [Emphasis mine].

The valorisation of western culture vis-à-vis African culture is most succinctly demonstrated by contrasting Tashi's experience of childbirth with Lissette's. As a result of Tashi's infibulation, the birth of her child, Benny, is both traumatic and

disastrous. “THE OBSTETRICIAN BROKE two instruments trying to make an opening large enough for Benny’s head. Then he used a scalpel. Then a pair of scissors used ordinarily to sever cartilage from bone” (55) [emphasis in text]. It is not clear why the obstetrician does not opt for a caesarean section in spite of being aware that the baby would not come out naturally. Later in the text, Tashi aborts a daughter rather than endure a caesarean operation as the idea of being cut up “sent [her] reeling into the shadows of [her] mind” (208). The fear of being cut up, however, does not arise in the case of Benny because either way Tashi was going to be cut up. I think Walker is simply insisting on a normal birth in order to demonstrate the horror of the infibulation. In contrast to Tashi’s difficulties in child bearing, Lissette has such an easy and pleasant time giving birth that she is “orgasmic at the end” (95). Her son, Petit Pierre, “practically slid into the world at the height of her amazement, smiling serenely even before he opened his eyes” (95)

In my opinion, Walker’s novel is not Eurocentric because it opposes FGM but because of the attitude and perspective that Walker postulates. She is not any different from the western missionaries who saw the practice as barbaric, cruel, savage, pointless and unhygienic. The novel seems to gravitate around two points only: that FGM is an oppressive patriarchal institution and that its main aim is to control women’s sexuality. In other words women are victims of men’s designs to exercise control over them. To many Africans, this position, though not without truth, is untenable as the single most important aspect of the ritual of female circumcision. Admittedly, writing is a selective business and we cannot ask an author to include everything in their works of art. What we must do, however, is to hold them accountable for what they choose to mirror. I think it is proper to assume that the images a writer employs are designed to give us the picture of the world that they want us to see. My argument is not just that Walker’s

images are inconsistent with my and other African people's observed reality, but that her images are not different from those of other colonialist and hence Eurocentric literature.

I have argued in this thesis that it is a dominant aspect of most western feminist discourses to view the struggle for women's liberty as essentially a struggle by women against men. Women are cast as victims and men as aggressors. I have also argued that African women's literature does not largely seem to follow this trend. This is not to say that men are not held responsible for some oppressive practices in African societies but that African women writers are more willing than their western counterparts to factor corporate responsibility, between men and women, in the sustenance and institutionalisation of hegemonies that marginalise and oppress women. FGM is one of the best examples of instances where that Afrocentric/Eurocentric opposition is graphically demonstrated. Walker, for example, gives women a clean bill of health as far as responsibility for mutilation is concerned.

Tashi's psychoanalysis brings to the surface the fact that her psychosis is directly linked to the mutilation she had received from M'lissa as well as to her sister Dura's death following mutilation by the same woman. Tashi's cure therefore lies in confronting M'Lissa as the symbolic representation of that psychosis and killing her in order to rid herself of the pain of her past. However, in the course of the confrontation, Tashi discovers that M'Lissa too thinks the ritual is brutal and savage to women and that M'Lissa carries out the practice because men make her do it. Walker is in effect suggesting that M'lissa is as much a victim as the women she circumcises. In the words of Lissette, FGM is about "...what men, with the corroboration of our mothers, do to us" (131). Walker is suggesting that FGM is a man's invention and that all women,

including the circumcisers, are victims. When Tashi, now Tashi Everlyn Johnson after having married Adam, is prosecuted for murdering M'Lissa, the Olinka society is divided simply between men and women. Women support Tashi by singing mournful songs and laying "wildflowers, herbs, seeds beads, ears of corn, anything they can claim their own and that they can spare" (183) as offerings within Tashi's view from her confinement. Men, whom Walker calls "cultural fundamentalists and Moslem fanatics" (183), on the other hand attack the women with stones, clubs, kicks and fists. When it comes to a cultural practice as deeply entrenched as FGM, it is inconceivable that the opposition between men and women can be this clear cut. In contrast, Rebeka Njau's heroine in *The Scar: A Tragedy in One Act*, who has assigned herself the role of educating and helping the girls to escape FGM, which she calls a "brutal custom that our people cling to" (Njau 1963, 24), has her staunchest critics in women. In their opposition to Mariana, the women critics claim that they are acting at the behest of elders, which would seem to suggest they are merely pawns of patriarchy, but Mariana, the heroine, also seems confident should that conflict ever be taken to the very same elders, she can win her case. Unfortunately the case never goes to the elders because Mariana is shamed by Yohana, now a pastor, but with whom Mariana had mothered an illegitimate child who had previously been kept a secret. Yohana, in the name of confessing his sins, reveals this former affair to members of the community which apparently means Mariana can no longer hold her position as a leader in the community. The play ends with women deriding and sneering at Mariana for having taught the girls to defy them. Although many African women would most likely agree, as Rebeka Njau does in this play, that circumcision is one of "the chains that have so long bound them" (1963, 25) they would not subscribe to a simplistic men/women opposition reading of the ritual. This, for example, is what Margaret Ogola (1998) who,

though not coming from a circumcising community, spent her formative years among one, has to say:

I hate the way women will go to international forums and start talking about FGM, we call it FGM medically, as if a part of a lobotomy, a part of the brain was removed. This is a minor operation and in some tribes it is extremely minor, it is just the significance of the shedding or rather the cleansing shedding of blood that was important. But now the women go out there, and many of them have undergone the operation, and they talk as if somebody truly did something terrible to them. But it was something that made you part of a generation, that made you acceptable and feel at home in that generation. They have forgotten that. So when they go and read that western hype they come and bring it here and it is as if men were collecting women and doing FGM on them while it was a women's thing, it was a sister thing, women did it to each other to prepare themselves.

Germaine Greer too seems to acknowledge this fact when she says: "Men mutilate the genitals of other men; usually women mutilate the genitals of other women, except where the procedure is carried out by a male professional" (1999, 94). I had the opportunity to interview Leah Muya on this subject in 1998. Leah Muya is a programme officer with *Maendeleo ya Wanawake*, the largest single women's organization in Kenya, and is charged with the duty of co-ordinating efforts to eradicate FGM in Kenya. After carrying out research in Meru, Kisii and Samburu districts and having found that the prevalence of the practice was 76% for Meru and 98% in the other two districts, her programme co-ordinated the emergence of an alternative ritual called *Ntanira na Mugambo* in *Ki-meru* (the language spoken by the Merus), which directly translates as circumcise through words or circumcise through education, and which is being replicated in other communities across Kenya. This alternative ritual involves gathering the girls together in their own specific communities, teaching them family life education and culminating, about eight days later, with eating, partying, dancing and celebrating which also involves family members, relatives and friends, during which time the girls are declared mature. During their training the girls are not only taught family life education, which was central to circumcision rites in most Kenyan

communities, but also why FGM is unnecessary. When I asked her to assess the success of the programme whose first graduates completed their training in 1996, she had this to say: “One of the success stories is that none of those girls who went through that process of alternative ritual has been circumcised. I think that is a mark of success in that none of them changed their mind. And none of the members of the community ever forced them into circumcision. The other one is that we have, in all districts, including Samburu and Narok, girls who have refused to be circumcised and they have found suitors and gone on to marry. I think this is a success story” (Muya 1998). Leah Muya is emphatic that blame for the rite cannot be apportioned unilaterally and that the entire community, men, women, boys and girls must be seen as making varying contributions to the ritual’s sustenance. She and her organisation do not therefore think that female circumcision is an invention of men but rather that it is “...a tradition that has been carried out through generations over a period when nobody can remember when it started and who started it, and who actually sanctioned it in the first place...” (Muya 1998) and that therefore, if any intervention is to be effective, it has to “...start from a community based point [where] members of that community have to be involved and given ample time to look at the pros and cons of the practice and come up with their own approach” (Muya 1998).

When Christian missionaries came to Kenya and other parts of Africa, they reacted exactly like Walker does in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. They condemned the ritual and demanded that those Africans who chose to follow the new faith abandon the practice. In Kenya, that draconian approach is best represented in Ngugi Wa Thiong’o’s novel *The River Between*. According to Leah, the Presbyterians, Anglicans, Methodists and the African Inland Church who were at the forefront of the crusade against FGM failed for several reasons. First, they did not start with everybody. They targeted only

members of their churches whose membership was cancelled if these new converts' daughters were circumcised. It meant that those who did not subscribe to the new faith, who were in the majority, continued with the practice. Secondly, like Walker, they did not have enough knowledge about the ritual in terms of why society insisted on circumcision, "who sanctioned the ritual [and] what values that circumcision had in people's lives" (Muya 1998). They failed because their approach, like Walker's, was one of condemnation. In Muya's informed opinion, "condemning female circumcision will not get us any where...even saying that it is barbaric will also not take us any where...even legislation before people are educated well enough to see what female circumcision does to the woman and what effect it will have in bringing up a healthy community, what effect it has on the girl during child birth, consummation of marriage, and long term effects of the cut, actually we will not be going anywhere"

There are therefore some major differences between Walker's approach and the one taken by *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* in Kenya. Besides positing the ritual in terms of a men/women opposition, Walker does not ascribe any positive significance to the ritual. Nearly all her explanations for the act revolve around sexuality and male domination. For Walker we need to realize, like Lissette, that there is a "...connection between mutilation and enslavement that is at the root of the domination of the women in the world" (131). She inscribes the Olinkan's reasoning for the ritual as 1) that the clitoris is an unclean body part, 2) that if uncut the clitoris would grow so large that the women would excite herself and her erection would stop men from penetrating her, 3) that the cut was necessary to stop women from achieving orgasm too easily and hence be deemed loose and 4) a conjecture that FGM is men's way of destroying women's sexual organs so as to stop them making love between themselves. Although Walker acknowledges that circumcision is used to bind women to society and give them a sense

of belonging, she uses none other than M'Lissa, the doyen of the tradition, to dismiss that claim as brainwashing and socialisation by a male dominated system and to assert that the practice makes the Olinkans, "nothing but torturers of children" (220).

In all fairness, Walker is right that the only reason why women feel that circumcision makes them *bona fide* members of their societies is socialisation. This is true of any cultural practice to which any community attaches significance. Muya's research also validates Walker's argument that circumcision has to do with the attempt to domesticate women and to curtail their sexual activities. In her words, the research revealed that women are circumcised because "this is going to make women more submissive to men. It will make them more reliable because they are not going to get other men. They are not going to be interested in going after other men" and that "...they are better domesticated if they have been circumcised" (Muya 1998). Circumcision is therefore directly related to other issues of gender bias such as the roles assigned for women in society and marriage in particular. Muya's research, however, seems to suggest that there is more to female circumcision than sexuality and domestication. It showed that the cut in the communities studied ensured that the girls could be secluded and therefore available for family life education and that the communities concerned seem to value this education more than the cut. She argues that it was on the basis of that education, imparted after the cut, that the girls were declared mature, responsible members of their communities and therefore eligible for marriage. *Maendeleo ya Wanawake* organisation's aim, therefore, is to enable communities to retain their family life education and to offer the girls a rite of passage between childhood and adulthood without having to endure the cut. Since *Maendeleo* is using a community-based approach in which the education programmes are designed with the help and co-

operation of community leaders, parents, boys and girls, its graduates are becoming increasingly acceptable as mature responsible members of their respective communities.

Walker's greatest contribution to the debate on FGM in Africa is her forceful demonstration of the potential dangers in the practice when things go wrong. Press reports in Kenya such as a feature article written by Jemmimah Mwakisha in the Daily Nation of 14th April 1999 indicate that girls, like Dura in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, have bled to death. This, indeed, is not a girl-specific problem, as boys too have had their penises chopped off accidentally in circumcision rituals sometimes resulting in death, as happened to a Meru boy in a case reported by the East African Standard of 21st Dec 2000. There is nothing Eurocentric about Walker's approach to circumcision as a potentially very dangerous practice. What is Eurocentric about her analysis is the use of specific and special cases to make universal judgements about a very complicated ritual. Tashi, for example, is not a typical Olinka girl, for she is circumcised when she is a grown up when other girls would be circumcised as children. In spite of undergoing the ritual when she is too old, she ends up with "the classic Olinka woman's walk, in which the feet appear to slide forward and are rarely raised above the ground" (63). The World Health Organisation (Rising Daughters Aware 1999) recognises four different types of circumcision: 1) "[e]xcision ...of the prepuce", which may involve "excision of part or all of the clitoris"; 2) "[e]xcision... of the clitoris with partial or total excision of the labia minora"; 3) "[e]xcision of part or all of the external genitalia and stitching/narrowing of the vaginal opening, also known as infibulation"; and 4) an unclassified type which may involve "pricking, piercing or incising of the clitoris and/or labia; stretching of the clitoris and/or labia cauterization by burning of the clitoris and surrounding tissue". All these types of circumcision are found with different degrees of prevalence in different communities in Africa. Tashi undergoes the worst type of the

practice, infibulation, yet there is evidence in the text that Walker invites us to treat Tashi's encounter as a standard experience for women in Africa. There is, for example, Walker's failure to locate the drama of her tale in any specific African country or community, choosing instead the fictional and symbolic Olinka community. However, she alludes to the possibility of locating the community in East Africa and specifically in Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and the Congo. Her characters refer to "our leader" whose likeness to Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of Kenya, and Haile Selassie, the Ethiopian prime minister whom the Rastafarians associated with the return-to-Africa dream, is unmistakable. The fact that the characters speak Kiswahili means most East African countries are candidates, but the fact that Tashi's home region is associated with the first cases of Aids also indicates Congo where Aids was first discovered in Africa. In spite of the wide geographical coverage of her text, implicating diverse communities and diverse circumcision types and practices, Walker insists that girls are circumcised "either at birth, or at the age of five or six, but certainly by the onset of puberty, ten or eleven" (60). While I am not questioning that some communities in Africa circumcise(d) the girls at Walker's chosen ages, I know from experience that girls from some communities in Kenya, such as the Kikuyu, are well beyond that age when they are circumcised. It is however true that some communities such as the Kisii circumcise girls between the ages five and eight. The Samburu circumcise them a day before marriage. Walker's Tashi is therefore not so much a falsification of an African experience as an exaggeration of the same, especially in the context of universalization which, I think, is a major problem with Eurocentric representations of African experiences.

Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, though a much more sophisticated analysis of gender politics in Africa than Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, is equally

Eurocentric. I have yet to find a critic who has paid attention to Dangarembga's Eurocentricity in *Nervous Conditions* even though it is on record (Petersen 1994) that she admits to having subscribed to Eurocentric conceptions of gender politics. In an interview with Petersen (1994) she was asked to comment on the evils of patriarchy in African women's lives. She responded, "I have become increasingly more reluctant to use this model of analysis as it is put forward by western feminism....(345)". What Dangarembga did not reveal at this juncture is whether her reluctance to apply western feminism to the African experience began before she wrote *Nervous Conditions* or after. She does, however, say that by that time, 1994, which is six years after the publication of *Nervous Conditions*, she had begun to revise her ideas vis-à-vis western feminism. She says: "I am beginning to revise my thinking, actually. *I used to adhere to a western model of feminism...*" (347) (Emphasis mine). With or without this admission, there are many indicators in *Nervous Conditions* of Dangarembga's endorsement of western culture such as the shocking first line in the novel, which has caught the attention of many critics, where Tambu unapologetically celebrates her brother's death. This is a very odd phenomenon especially in a part of the world where you do not talk ill of the dead, let alone celebrate their passing away, even if they were known witches. Other indicators of Eurocentricity in this text include Nyasha's anorexia; Nyasha's and Tambu's introduction to rationality through western classics; and the pursuit of western formal schooling as a means to cultural liberation. Besides these indicators, however, I think that Moyana (1996) has correctly diagnosed what sets *Nervous Conditions* apart from previous African texts written by men or women. Moyana argues that *Nervous Conditions* is great because its women are new and revolutionary. This newness is located in the "...glaring antagonism between men and women" (34) and that in this opposition, women "...end with the upper hand" (34). Moyana's observation, coupled with Dangarembga's own admission to having

subscribed to western feminism, I submit, provides key tools for understanding *Nervous Conditions*. If the message of the novel were to be stated in terms of Achebe's *The Problem with Nigeria*, it would have to be that the problem with Africa is patriarchy and the cure is western feminism. It is this approach I am calling a Eurocentric approach to an African problem

The narrative of *Nervous Conditions* is told from the perspective of Tambu, now a grown up, as she reminisces on her experience growing up in a rural Shona village in Zimbabwe, before moving on to the city and mission school where her uncle, Babamukuru, was headmaster. Tambu clearly states the objective of her narrative, it is to demonstrate her own and Lucia's (her aunt's) escape; her mother's and Maiguru's (Babamukuru's wife) entrapment, and Nyasha's rebellion. Nyasha is Tambu's first cousin. Marriage and fatherhood are central to each of the issues of escape, rebellion and entrapment. Lucia argues in response to Babamukuru's demand for obedience that "may be when you marry, a woman is obliged to obey you. But some of us aren't married, and so we do not know how to do it"(172). Therein lies her escape. She never gets married. Marriage is portrayed in many instances in the text as a prison or entrapment (174). Maiguru and Nyasha's mother are trapped because of their marriage to men who are in every way embodiments of patriarchal tyranny. The argument that patriarchy enslaves and entraps women is most succinctly stated by Nyasha while expressing the futility of Maiguru's attempt at emancipation when Maiguru runs away from her husband because she feels that marriage "[has] prevented her from doing the things she wanted to do". Nyasha tells Tambu:

Sometimes I feel I am trapped by that man, just like she is. But now she's broken out, I know it's possible, so I can wait.... But it's not that simple, you know, really it isn't. It's not really him, you know. I mean not really the person. It's everything, it's everywhere. So where do you break out. I don't know. Tambu, I really don't know. So what do you do (174).

In other words, the tyranny of patriarchy is incurably pervasive in this African society, and hence is like a hydra-headed monster that women must battle with. Marriage is the single most powerful institution in terms of legitimating the hegemony of patriarchy and it is in this context that the idea of Maiguru's and Tambu's mother's entrapment must be viewed.

I think that in order to fully appreciate the ramifications and the main underlying message of *Nervous Conditions*, we need to take cognisance of the fact that though the narrative is told from Tambu's perspective, its ideals are enshrined in Nyasha. Nyasha is the visionary who accurately diagnoses the sickness of this African society and refuses to be cowed into silence or co-opted into the evils of its patriarchy, or even to stoically accept suffering as her lot in a male dominated community just because she is a woman. She becomes neurotic or hysterical because, to use Tambu's words, she is torn between her ability to "persistently [see] and [draw] attention to things you would rather not talk about; shredding to bits with her sharp wit the things she thought we could do without, even if everybody else thought they were important" (97), and her inability to do anything about it because of the depth of entrenchment of gender stereotypes in the people's psyche. The basis of her rebellion is the contradiction between her critical analysis of society and the dogmatic insistence by society, with Babamukuru as its chief representative, that she fits into stereotypical gender roles. Viewed against this background, and bearing in mind that the centre of the story is Tambu's triumph against discrimination on the basis of her sex, it is then clear that Nyasha's rebellion is to be viewed positively.

Tambu's development in terms of education, growth, location and relocation is a process of enlightenment and transformation that brings her closer and closer to being

like Nyasha. In many ways Nyasha is Tambu's *alter ego*. In this context, I find Flockemann's (1992) article, "Not-Quite Insiders and Not-quite Outsiders: The Process of Womanhood in *Beka Lam, Nervous Conditions* and *Daughters of Twilight*" very illuminating. In this article she argues that Tambu and Nyasha are different representations of self. In other words the two characters are used to create the "Not-Quite other" and "the Not-Quite self" (38). For Tambu, Nyasha "...provides a dialectical relationship between the self that survives and the none-other self that succumbs to self-destructive despair, flight or death" (38). As the novel develops, Tambu becomes more and more like Nyasha, culminating with Tambu's rebellion against participating in her parents wedding which Babamukuru had orchestrated because Jeremiah, Tambu's father, and his wife had all along supposedly been living in sin because they had not contracted a Christian marriage. For the first time, Tambu manages to disobey Babamukuru who, to her, had assumed near divine powers. To rebel against him was like rebelling against God. This single act of rebellion by Tambu, however, should not be mistaken as a defining moment in the development of Tambu's revolutionary consciousness. She never quite gets that far. On this particular occasion she accepts Babamukuru's criticism and punishment almost as if she thinks she deserves it. She rationalises her acquiescence and acceptance of the punishment by arguing that it was the price of her newfound identity. It takes Nyasha to expose this stance by Tambu as logically flawed because then it would seem that Tambu would have been disappointed had she not been punished. It is also unclear on what basis she should have accepted punishment for rebelling against an injustice even if we grant her argument that her acceptance was "with a deep and grateful masochistic delight" (169). Once again I think Flockemann is right when she argues that Tambu "defers to Babamukuru on almost every occasion...(42)." Although Tambu the narrator says her

story is about her and Lucia's escape, I think Tambu's escape is to be located outside rather than within the text.

In her article, "Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*", Uwakwe (1995) is right in observing that what constitutes Tambu's liberation is that she finds voice to tell the story while occupying an "interpretative position" (75). Indeed there is something incomplete about *Nervous Conditions*, almost as if Dangarembga was leaving options open for a sequel. We never get to know for example what the grown up Tambu is doing. Does she get married? If she does, how does she negotiate her position, and if she does not is that because she examines marriage as an institution, finds it oppressive and therefore rejects it? In other words, now that Tambu is, in the words of Creamer (1994), an informed narrator as opposed to the uninformed character in the text, how does she confront patriarchy in her daily experiences other than exposing it as oppressive through this narrative? Creamer (1994) correctly argues that in order to escape, to really escape, one would have to deal with a very pervasive patriarchy. Tambu never does that, but Nyasha does. Tambu, the uninformed character, survives not because she confronts and negotiates her terms with patriarchy but because she learns to survive within the system without challenging it. On the other hand, Nyasha breaks down not because there is something logically or inherently wrong with her ideas, but because there is something logically and inherently wrong with a patriarchy that is so strongly pervasive in society that it overwhelms her. She is a character to empathise with rather than criticise. The overall message of *Nervous Conditions* is not the need to create space for women within patriarchy, (Tete Gladys is not helpful to women even though she is part of patriarchy), but to resist and deconstruct the system. It is in this context I argue that Nyasha's ideals are the ones that the novel largely endorses. Nyasha's handling of the resistance may be questionable

but her understanding of the specific things that women should not have to put up with is never in question.

A second aspect of the novel that we need to pay attention to is the irony and cynicism that Dangarembga packs into the narrative through the use of understatement. Tambu tells the story both from the perspective of a teenage girl just taken from her village, and as a grown-up who now finds some of the things she had taken for granted ridiculous. The interpretation of her own childhood and growth is therefore also shaped by her experience beyond the 1960s and 1970s, the period in which most of the action in the novel takes place. This can, for example, be seen in her interpretation of things that her brother, Nhamo, had said to her back in the village when they were growing up in reference to the position of girls in society. With the wisdom of hindsight she says:

I was quite sure at the time that Nhamo knew as well as I did that the things he had said were not reasonable, but in the years that have passed since then I have met so many men who consider themselves responsible adults and therefore ought to know better, who still subscribe to the fundamental principles of my brother's budding elitism, that to be fair to him I must conclude that he was sincere in his bigotry. But in those days I took a rosy view of male nature (49).

Because of her now privileged, and therefore more informed, position many of the things she says are double edged. Praise for Babamukuru, for example, carries with it severe censure. He is both god and the devil because much as he gives and provides for his less privileged family members, he also takes away their right to choose and their self expression. Much as he is provident in material terms he exercises his patriarchal authority to usurp the rights of the women as is demonstrated in his administration of Lucia's case back in the village and his attempt to silence and force Nyasha into his patriarchal ideological mould. This ideological mould is best defined by Tambu as the expectation that every woman becomes what she describes as a "...paragon of feminine decorum" (155) meaning that women should be self-effacing and that they should

“hardly ever [talk] unless spoken to” (155), that if spoken to they must “answer with utmost respect whatever question [is] asked” (155) and “[a]bove all, [they should] not question things” (155). While Tambu was not critical of this system then, she is now cynical and contemptuous of these values which found crystallisation in Babamukuru whom she had previously elevated to the level of a deity.

I am not suggesting here that Dangarembga is Eurocentric because she subjects African patriarchy to a stinging criticism but because she locates her alternative values in Europe. It is important to state that unlike Walker, Dangarembga is cognisant of the fact that because of racism black women cannot find equality in Eurocentric circles. However, to borrow from deconstruction, her opposition to Eurocentrism is stalked by both “blindness and insight” (Norris 1982). She provides insights into the ways in which male dominated western value systems and African patriarchy combine to undermine African women’s freedom but her thesis ends in a cul-de-sac because it suggests that African women’s freedom lies in embracing western value systems. I think that Dangarembga’s case for embracing western value systems in pursuit of gender freedom is theorised in Nyasha as shall become clear shortly. Nyasha is a thoroughly anglicised girl. Creamer (1994) says that Nyasha is “marked as English” (355) in the same way that “...Tambu’s other symbols of liberation have been” (335). Tambu calls Nyasha her thoroughbred cousin. By Nyasha’s own admission, she finds it difficult to relate to the girls in her class because:

They do not like my language, my English because it’s authentic and my Shona because it is not. They think that I am a snob, that I think I am superior to them because I do not feel that I am inferior to men (if you can call the boys in my class men) (196).

Nyasha is the girl whose thoughts flow best in English rather than Shona. To her fellow students, Nyasha is anglicised because of her speech, language as well as accent, “the

way she dresses for Saturday nights” (34) and the way she behaves with boys (94). Rather than read the same romances that the other girls read, Nyasha reads such classics as *Lady Chatterly's Lover* by D.H. Lawrence and the writings of the Bronte sisters. Nyasha is unable to fit in the African world precisely because she had spent her formative years in England where she had learnt freedom for all, men and women, and in the process failed to become enculturated into an African world where women defer to men. Nyasha constantly contrasts her experience in England to her experience in Africa. In England she was comfortable but in Africa she becomes “a whore with dirty habits” (117). In reading English classics, Nyasha, like Tambu after her, had become introduced to a world where “reason and inclination were not at odds...” (93) and this of course contrasts to their experience, Tambu and Nyasha, in Africa, where nothing short of silence was required of them. Although Babamukuru is educated in the west, he went there as a grown up and therefore never quite managed to imbibe the cultural nuances of the west. Western education only managed to endow him with greater power in his society because besides being a patriarch, he now has economic power with which to buttress his culturally endowed position of influence. The core of his world view remains an African male dominated one where the ideal woman is a submissive, married homemaker. This is the view that incenses Nyasha and which is in contradiction to white people’s view. Babamukuru puts it succinctly when he admonishes Tambu as follows:

By the time you have finished your Form Four you will be able to take your course, whatever it is that you choose. In time you will be earning money. You will be in a position to be married by a decent man and set up a decent home. *In all that we are doing for you, we are preparing you for this future life of yours, and I have observed from my own daughter's behaviour that it is not a good thing for a young girl to associate too much with these white people, to have too much freedom. I have seen that girls who do that do not develop into decent women* (180) (Emphasis mine).

This quote should be seen against the background of *Nervous Conditions* being a novel about African women's freedom. Freedom is the desired goal in the text. And I am suggesting that in this text, Dangarembga argues that in order for African women to be free, they have to be more and more white or at least move closer and closer to whiteness. The text seems to validate Frantz Fanon's claim that "for the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white" (1986, 12).

In the novel, Nyasha is the one who comes closest to being anglicised, and Tambu, her *alter ego* also finds her process of enlightenment and liberation being simultaneously a movement away from the African homestead and toward the white dominated schooling system. Tambu's movement of liberation is therefore first from her village school, where she is denied a chance in the schooling system because she is a girl, to the mission where she mixes with both black and white students, but most importantly comes under the influence of her "thoroughbred" cousin, and finally to the convent where is she one of the very few Africans admitted. Although the convent the first place she encounters discrimination on the basis of race, she nevertheless views the convent as marking "a world where burdens lightened with every step, soon to disappear altogether" (191). As usual, Dangarembga employs hyperbole to infuse this view with a measure of sarcasm, but it is nevertheless undeniable that Tambu is right in seeing the convent as "another step upwards in the direction of my freedom" (183). It is "another step from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full, from dirt and disease, from my father's abject obeisance to Babamukuru and my mother's chronic lethargy" (183). In this novel therefore, African women should not just exploit Europe's, and specifically England's, potential for economic emancipation, that alone would not constitute freedom as Maiguru's case demonstrates,

but they should also borrow its cultural values because this would lead to African women's liberation from their culturally constructed constraints.

I think one other reason that sets *Nervous Conditions* apart from previous African texts is the fact that the text is not very concerned about cultural antagonism between Europe and Africa. It is not even about the evils of colonialism or imperialism, which have been central topics for previous African writers. I am aware that many critics have tried to demonstrate how Dangarembga explores the double oppression that African women find themselves in when caught between a racist colonial ideology and a sexist African patriarchy. Grundy (1992), for example, in an article titled "A Special Kind of White Person" argues that whites at the missionary where Tambu attended school and where her uncle was headmaster, were guilty of having colonised the minds of the locals. The article argues that the missionaries had exploited the minds of Zimbabweans while the colonialists exploited resources such as land and the body. The author, however, acknowledges that whites do not feature in the text until nearly half way through. This I think underlines the relative unimportance of colonialism to the issues at the core of *Nervous Conditions*. It is instructive that no white character, colonialist or missionary, is developed in detail by Dangarembga. In fact we meet more of the missionaries' children than we meet their parents. And the whites we meet are either benevolent, like the old lady who is horrified that Tambu is working rather than at school and who therefore gives her money, or the strange kind that like to speak Shona rather than English and whose children are more African than English. There is no major black/white encounter, let alone a clash, in this text, and when one briefly occurs the white person is a benevolent. Even in the convent where the most glaringly racist comment is made in reference to racial segregation, besides revelations of poor living

standards for the blacks, the experience is dismissed in a few lines. Whites form the background rather than centre of this text.

In an article titled “*Nervous Conditions: Dangarembga’s Feminist Reinvention of Fanon*”, Charles Sugnet (1997) correctly observes that although “the novel’s period encompasses such land mark events in the national narrative as the founding of ZAPU and ZANU, the ten-year detention of Robert Mugambe and Joshua Nkomo, Ian Smith’s Unilateral Declaration of Independence, and the officially celebrated first battle of the *chimurenga* war on April 28, 1966...there appear...only three direct references to these events in the novel” (34). Sugnet correctly concludes that “[t]he national liberation struggle is conspicuous by its absence in this novel” (34). He, in spite of this observation, argues that there may be “..a complex, partly subterranean relationship between it (the national liberation struggle) and the struggles of the young Tambudzai against the immediate manifestations of patriarchy in her life” (34). Like Sugnet, Caroline Rooney (1995), in her article entitled “Re-possession: Inheritance and Independence in Chenjerai Hove’s *Bones* and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*”, observes that “[a]lthough set in the war of liberation, *Nervous Conditions* makes little reference to this, choosing to address issues of women’s emancipation. The war areas in the novel are within the patriarchal family” (135). It seems to me that Dangarembga merely wants to acknowledge that black/white relations, where power and privilege is appropriated by or through whiteness do exist, but beyond that her object of attention is African patriarchy. While Sugnet may be right that there is a subterranean narrative of the Zimbabwean national liberation struggle in the text, I think Rooney is more accurate in observing that “the war areas in the novel are within the patriarchal family” (135). Dangarembga does not leave the evils of patriarchy to the imagination or interpretation, she makes explicit statements. Tambu, for example, soon

realises that her experience in the village was not predicated on the insensitivity of a brother but that “...all conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. *Femaleness as opposed and inferior to men*”[emphasis mine] (116). She realises that the victimisation she had felt at home did not “... depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition” (115). “It didn’t depend on any of the things [she] had thought it depended on. *Men took it everywhere with them*” [emphasis mine] (115-116). Nothing demonstrates the centrality of patriarchy in this text better than the family *dare*, or court, which “...consisted of the patriarchy” (136) and which meets to hear a case between Takesure and Lucia. The only woman allowed in the *dare* is Tete Gladys because of her “patriarchal status...” (132). During the trial, “[t]he patriarchy put its head together and conferred in low voices because they knew [that Tambu and the rest of the women] were listening” (145). The words patriarch and patriarchy are constantly supplied in this text as a means of locating the source of women’s subordination.

Colonialism is not the subject of this novel and the only instance when it is pin-pointed as central to tensions in the text is in the last pages when Nyasha charges that all of them, herself, Babamukuru, Maiguru, Tambu and all the other characters have been isolated from themselves and each other by colonialism. However, it is not clear what the colonialists have precisely done. Babamukuru cannot be accused of being westernised unless one thinks of his Christianity, which is manifested in his going to church every Sunday and insisting that his brother undergoes a church wedding, and the modern property, such as the car and the house, that he owns. Culturally speaking neither Maiguru nor Babamukuru displays any inclination to imbibe western culture. The only way in which colonialism can be accused of creating Babamukuru is in the way it has helped him to buttress his position as a patriarch in the village by endowing him with immense economic power vis-à-vis the rest of the villagers. Nyasha’s

conclusion is blighted by the fact that it is made when she is least in control of her senses. She is experiencing a nervous breakdown and has been desperately trying “not to antagonise” (196) Babamukuru, “the most revered patriarch” (197). Even though she tears her colonial history books to pieces, the nervous breakdown must really be traced to her father’s patriarchal autocracy rather than the falsehoods of eurocentric representations of African history. It seems to me that in reading *Nervous Conditions*, the critic has to rid her/himself of the assumption that every African post-colonial text must of necessity engage colonialism and its evil effects. I think this is neither the case nor is it necessary. Dangarembga has broken away from early post-independence writers’ obsession with the evils of colonialism. She is in the class of emerging African writers who feel it is time Africans dealt with internally generated evils, with colonialism as subsidiary rather than central to their texts. She demonstrates that the post-coloniality of the African novel must not only be seen in terms of publication in a post-colonial era but also as one which is post-colonial in its shift from over-indulgence in Europe’s sins against Africa. Europe’s disruption of African cultural systems is not dismissed, but it occupies the margins rather than the centre of this kind of post-colonial African novel’s discourses.

I acknowledge that my critique of *Nervous Condition* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* raises the question of whether a text is, in my opinion, only considered Afrocentric if it does not reject what Nyasha calls “traditions and expectations and authority” (190) in Africa. I turn to Rebeka Njau and Margaret Ogola, who, I submit, are critical of “traditions and expectations and authority”, and who indeed recommend expunging what they consider to be harmful and gender insensitive practices, but without deferring to Eurocentric value systems. Rebeka Njau, for example, unlike Alice Walker, examines African spirituality, demonstrates its patriarchal nature and the need for its

reformation without necessarily dismissing it as repulsive, reactionary, or useless. Walker's characters delight in demonstrating that African taboos, such as those forbidding sex in the maize fields, are irrational and pointless. I am not suggesting that the maize would dry up if men and women made love in the maize fields, but as Soyinka argues in an article titled *Writer, Witch, Heretic* what matters is not the veracity of the claims but what society makes of the claim. In this article, Soyinka makes reference to attitudes toward witches by diverse societies in different historical epochs. He says of the witches:

They were capable of flight - usually on broomsticks. Certainly they levitated. They peered into the human soul, pared away all subterfuge and dared declare what they saw. They had this strange faculty of foresight, the capacity to peer into the future - or they were believed to possess it, which came to the same thing. *Their actual claims are not really important – what matters was what society believed them capable of* (Soyinka 2001) (Emphasis mine).

I have to admit that just because a society believes a thing to be true does not necessarily mean the thing is either rational or true. What I am however saying is that there are events in history or human experiences for which neither science nor logic provides sufficient explanation. I do not think, for example, that science or logic can either prove or disprove the existence of God. If therefore, in such matters, one person decides to put more faith in science as opposed to God, that does not necessarily give him authority to dismiss s/he who chooses to believe in God more than science. It is in this context that I wish to explore Njau's re/presentation of the pool in *Ripples in the Pool*. Njau insists that the only way forward for a people is to understand their cultures first. While trying to explain to me how she came to writing *Kenyan Women Heroes and their Mystical Powers* she had this to say:

You find that a lot of women, and even men, they are not themselves, they copy and they are afraid because they are trying to copy someone else's culture. *They are not confident within that culture and yet they do not know their backgrounds, they do not know themselves. I keep on writing about wanting to know myself and also advising, telling other people, you know, that that is the only way you can progress.* (Njau 1998) (emphasis mine).

Having undertaken all her education in Africa, in Kenya and Uganda, Njau has remained well connected to her culture. Unlike Ogot who trained and worked in England, or Dangarembga who spent her formative years in England, Njau spent her early years in rural Kenya, in Kiambu, before pursuing higher education at Makerere in Uganda. Upon returning to Kenya, she became the founding headmistress of Nairobi Girls High School (now Moi Girls High School) in 1964. Having retired, she now lives in Ongata Rongai, in the outskirts of Nairobi, where she continues to engage in her interests as a textile artist while sometimes running a small scale business selling African curios and artefacts. Rebeka Njau, who is now divorced from Elimo Njau, the Tanzania born educationist whom she had married in 1959, is not to be taken as largely unaware of cultures outside Africa as she is widely travelled. She been to many to many western countries such as Germany, Sweden, Denmark and France and given lectures on women and development in Kenya (Ondego 2000).

Njau's marriage was obviously not a happy one. She (1998) revealed to me that one of the things that shocked her upon marriage was the discovery that she was not meant to hold an independent opinion. She says "I never imagined that if I got married somebody could feel that they can possess my brain, that I must see things in his own way of seeing and someone who will not listen when I say this is the right way to follow". According to an interview recorded by Ondego (2000), Njau's marriage to Elimo finally crumbled when she discovered that her husband had not only started an affair with an American missionary, Phillda, but that he had secretly fathered three children with her. In Ondego's words, Njau wrote *Ripples in the Pool* "for therapeutic effects". Her interview with me (Njau 1998) seems to validate this position because she says that she wrote the novel "when [she] was feeling so intensely about certain things" that she had

to do something about it. She argues that “when you feel so intensely, you either have to go crazy or bring out what you feel and communicate with other people”.

It is therefore possible that *Ripples in the Pool* was Njau’s way of dealing with the crisis in her own marriage at that time. *Ripples in the Pool* is centred around Selina, whose mother has been driven to suicide by the cruelty of her husband. Selina, who is epileptic in her early days, is raped during one of her seizures by a gang of men at a roadside. She runs away to the city, where she learns the art of using and manipulating men, black and white, to provide for her own needs. When she decides to settle down she picks on Gikere, a colleague at Mbagathi hospital where she has found a job as a nurse after educating herself, for a husband because she knows he is weak, gutless and easy to control. After their marriage Gikere and Selina move to the village where Gikere wants to build a clinic. There, men and women rise up against Selina’s independence. Gikere’s mother becomes Selina’s worst critic, finally managing to incite Gikere to be violent towards his wife. In the course of the crisis, Karuga, Selina’s distant cousin, comes to help Gikere with the clinic. He has been living as an apprentice with Muthee, who is the village high priest and custodian of the sacred pool. Karuga, like Selina, has no immediate relatives because his mother had drowned in the pool which she scorned after having converted to Christianity and become a fundamentalist. By the time Karuga joins Gikere, Selina has already been driven into a neurotic state by patriarchal dominance in the village, surprisingly enforced in an immediate sense by her mother-in-law, in the demand that she defers to men. Her only comfort is Gaciiro, Gikere’s sister, whom Selina loves in a possibly lesbian manner. Selina guards Gaciiro so jealously that when Karuga begins making sexual overtures to Gaciiro and Gaciiro seems to respond positively, it excites Selina’s neurotic fury. She then kills Gaciiro before running away into the bushes. A distraught Karuga returns to Muthee to seek

advice and meditate by the pool. While trying to unravel the mystery of the pool, Karuga encounters Selina hiding among the reeds near the pool. She kills him.

Rebeka Njau makes it explicit that the pool is a patriarchal institution with Muthee as the arch-patriarch and Karuga being groomed to take over. Njau also suggests that the pool is implicated in women's victimhood. Karuga's mother drowns herself in the pool after finding it impossible to express her new found faith and sense of liberation and mental independence from patriarchal control. The pool in this sense is a symbol of loss and defeat for women. However, the pool is not to be seen as merely oppressive to women. The pool in this text is a spiritual phenomenon or icon. It is a metaphor for the people's spirituality. It is not about whether or not it possesses real mystical powers but that it is a symbolic representation of the people's "...honour and fear of the power of the unseen" (23). It is a source of healing, not just for physical and pathological illnesses, but also for psychosomatic illnesses for both men and women. Njau writes as one deeply conscious of the opposition between tradition and modernity. Although her writing asserts the fatedness of the demise of some traditional values, almost in the same way that Oedipus was fated to marry his mother and kill his father, she uses the pool to locate some aspects of tradition that should not be lost with modernisation. Njau represents the modern/traditional opposition in the contrast between Muthee's pool and the emergence of a modern hospital built in the village by the local M.P., Kefa Munene. In contrast to Kefa Munene, who is a rogue and only interested in selfish gain, Muthee is a selfless man who sees his duty to cure society as divine and therefore not to be commercialised. I find it significant that Selina, after killing Gaciru, hides among the reeds near the pool and that she kills Karuga as he contemplates the pool. Karuga's death signifies the need to reform the pool but not to expunge it, as the pool assumes both benevolent and malevolent status for Selina. It is a hiding place as well as the site

for confronting the patriarchal forces that have been against her and all women for generations. When she kills Karuga and his body is placed under the fig tree, he symbolically becomes the sacrifice for the beginning of reform of the pool. This becomes apparent because the fig tree in Kikuyu cosmology is a shrine, as explained by Kenyatta in *Facing Mount Kenya*. Maina is expressing consciousness of continuity when, in spite of Karuga's death and the old man's failing health, he still asserts that the "fig tree would survive the generations and the generations to come like the light, spirit and the truth that live on for ever" (152).

The pool should be seen in the wider context of Njau's interests. She has co-authored a book with Gideon Mulaki on Kenyan women titled *Kenyan Women Heroes and their Mystical Power*. According to the blurb at the back of the text, it "...is the kind of book that will be particularly useful to all those who want to understand the role played by women endowed with special gifts and skills in traditional Kenya. It will also be useful in correcting the traditional stereotyped image of Kenya women." Njau and Mulaki take time to document the life histories of powerful women in different Kenyan societies in colonial and pre-colonial times. Nearly every one of the ten women discussed was renowned for her supernatural powers, such as the ability to foretell the future as well as to heal. In 1998, while interviewing Rebeka Njau on a wide range of issues including her writings, I asked her why she had chosen to write the book about Kenyan women and their mystical power, and this was her response:

[P]oliticians were talking about these African women who were copying the western women, talking about liberation and that kind of thing. I wanted us to find out where our strength came from. Whether it came from the west or from our own past. Our own old women. And I discovered that our own women may have been illiterates but they had powers, they had gifts, they were talented and men listened to them and respected them. I was not afraid. I said well we have come from somewhere. I was very interested that people should go back to their roots and discover themselves.... You must know where you have come from, you must conquer your own background and then you can look forward and spread out (Njau 1998).

In this quote there are two subjects that seem to recur in Njau's writings: first the attempt to demonstrate that there were strong women in traditional African society, with specific reference to the Kikuyu, who needed no foreigners for assistance in recognising and opposing patriarchal dominance; and secondly the desire to exhort people to understand and conquer their own cultural environments rather than blindly aping foreign cultures. The pool and the fig tree in *Ripples in the Pool* are metaphors of the people's "own background" or culture which they must first understand and conquer in order to move forward. The pool and the fig tree are not to be discarded but to be understood and reformed.

Ripples in the Pool is about a Kenyan society in transformation in a post-colonial era. The title alludes to the stirrings of change. The society is likened to a pool into which foreign objects, in this case disruptive and revolutionary ideas from within and without, are thrown causing ripples. Karuga's mother, an independent minded woman who had embraced Christianity, in spite of her excesses, marks the beginning of such disruptions. Her mistake, as is discerned by Selina, was not questioning and challenging men as the wielders of power in her day but her excess in embracing and propagating the ideals of the new faith. Selina says that Karuga's mother became egotistic and self-righteous, and when the society failed to understand her she became bitter and gave up the fight. Muthee, the old man and perhaps the most perceptive character in the text, locates Karuga's mother's frustrations in her blind acceptance of Christianity as a new faith and the abandoning of traditional faith as represented by the pool. In consequence she found herself at odds with society. As she tried to preach her new faith, she "found herself unwelcome in every house she entered" (58). Unlike the traditional faith, Christianity as a new faith was a "fleeting kind that comes and goes, then comes again, over and over

again, coming and going, with no strong roots reaching hungrily deep into the soil” (58). Like Selina, Karuga’s mother too became neurotic. In the middle of her crisis Karuga’s mother would go to Muthee to weep on his shoulder. He tried making her embrace the spiritual significance of the pool, which he believed to hold the answer to mystery of life, but she scorned it at the cost of her life.

Njau is conscious that change is inevitable. Her argument, however, is that embracing modernity without a corresponding understanding and transcending of tradition is bound to leave society more in chaos and pain than in freedom. In other words, to use Achebe’s words in the title of his classic novel, *Things [will] Fall Apart*. The society that Njau describes is one that is falling apart precisely because people are not willing to take time to delve into the depths of their consciousness in order to strategize the future. It is this lethargy that Muthee recognises when the people come to him for healing and therefore refuses to prescribe drugs for their illnesses. Njau writes:

In the last few months, he had come to realise that these men and women wanted drugs to anaesthetise their feelings and harden themselves against the cares and worries for their lives. They were not ready to dig deep into the soil and remove the worm that destroyed the seed planted long ago by their forefathers. So instead of mixing herbs and roots for cures, he would lead them to a patch of land he loved and with his cultivating knife would stir up the soil, dipping his hands right into the earth (83).

This was his way of asking the people to stop scratching at the surface of things when trying to solve their problems but to dig deep into the soil, meaning into the forces that sustained them in the past, and learn from them. We must understand this image of digging deep into the soil in the context of the Kikuyu and their relationship to land. In regard to the conception of land, and therefore soil, by the Kikuyu, this is what Jomo Kenyatta says in *Facing Mount Kenya*:

In studying the Gikuyu tribal organisation it is necessary to take into consideration land tenure as the most important factor in the social, political, religious, and economic life of the tribe. As agriculturists, the Gikuyu people

depend entirely on the land. It supplies them with the material needs of life, through which spiritual and mental contentment is achieved. Communion with the ancestral spirits is perpetuated through contact with the soil in which the ancestors of the tribe lie buried. The Gikuyu consider the earth as the “mother” of the tribe, for the reason that the mother bears her burden for about eight months or nine moons while the child is in her womb, and then for a short period of suckling. But it is the soil that feeds the child through lifetime; and again after death it is the soil that nurses the spirits of the dead for eternity. Thus the earth is the most sacred thing above all that dwell in or on it (1938, 22).

It is in this context that Muthee’s gestures of asking people to dig deep into the soil must be seen. It may be argued that then Njau’s thesis is flawed, especially when its underlying philosophy is the liberation of women, since the traditional past is a patriarchal system that has been basically oppressive to women. The first counter to this view is the fact that Njau believes that women were given leeway to exercise their powers in traditional Africa, especially in reference to healing and priestly duties. As I have already observed, it is this conviction that led her to research and publish *Kenya Women Heroes: and their Mystical Power*. But secondly and most importantly, Njau believes that understanding one’s traditions and culture is the best foundation for charting the future. It is in this context that I understand why Njau’s progressive women either fail, die or go mad. These women and the men in their livers are unable to positively manage change. The women are the ones who go mad because they are the ones desperate for change and therefore become more affected when initiating change meets heavy resistance. This however does not mean that Njau is against or unable to envision change.

Indeed *Ripples in the Pool* is not about preservation or sustenance of the *status quo*, but rather about the need to learn the art of managing change or dealing with dissenting views. Gikere’s failure is not so much his patriarchal entrenchment or masculinity, for Selina herself thinks he is not masculine enough and that he is a gutless imbecile, but rather his inability to contain or live with Selina’s independence of thought and action. I

think that Njau draws a parallel between the Selina/Gikere relationship and the Karuga/Njeru relationship. Njeru is a stubborn independent minded goat that Karuga finds impossible to tame. In his frustration and fury, Karuga breaks Njeru's leg only to be given that very goat by Maina and then denied the chance to kill the goat, as he would have wished. Muthee argues: "life that is smooth is not life at all.... Where is our strength if we fail to control one helpless little creature? If we destroy Njeru, is that the end of pain? What shall we do with the other Njerus among us" (68). When Karuga insists that Njeru should be killed because he is mad and incorrigible, Muthee retorts in words that perfectly fit Selina:

My son, be patient. Njeru is not just a stupid mad animal. I have watched him, and I know he wishes to communicate with us but his way is blocked. The rope around his neck makes him helpless, and he is angry because we have shut him away from the things he wants to do. Can't you understand this, my son?...If we have denied him the things he loves, why shouldn't we be patient with his mad ways? I know Njeru is a maniac today, but why should we suppose he will be a maniac tomorrow? (69-70)

Like Njeru's incorrigibility, Selina's psychosis is never cured because Gikere and society at large are unable to cope with her independence. They are unable to accept her dissenting views in the same way that Muthee says Karuga had learnt to "take for granted those thorny shrubs on his path in the wilderness" (71). In other words when Muthee tells the people to stop scratching at the surface of things but to confront and deal with life's cares and worries, he is in effect saying that they must learn to deal with progressive and independent minded women such as Selina. He is arguing that rather than seek to exterminate or employ violence to silence those that hold contrary views, as Karuga attempts with Njeru and Gikere with Selina, society must learn to accept and live with them.

Finally, although Njau is obviously aware of the imbalance of power in favour of men, she does not construct a simplistic men/women power axis where women occupy the

position of victims and men that of aggressors. As in *Kenya Women Heroes: and their Mystical Power*, Njau's *Ripples in the Pool* seeks to dispel the myth of inactive, powerless and property-less African women. It is for this reason that in spite of Selina becoming psychotic because the male dominated system gives her no room to express herself, she is not presented as merely a victim of men. Indeed Gikere, her husband, is more her victim than her tormentor. Selina woos and marries him because she knows he is soft, weak and therefore manipulable. It is true that he subjects her to domestic violence twice and that that is supposed to make him feel more of a man than if he never beats her, but in both instances Njau invites us to empathise with Gikere without excusing him. In the first instance he turns violent because Selina attacks his mother, while in the second instance he is provoked by news that Selina has secretly sold their land and house to Gikere's nemesis, Kefa Munene. Unlike Dangarembga and Walker, Njau does not construct silenced, disinherited and disempowered women overwhelmed by a unitary patriarchal system, but rather a social system, patriarchal in nature but sustained by both men and women in almost equal share.

Gikere's mother, for example, is a land owner and an astute business woman whose husband left her early in marriage, but she nevertheless thinks Gikere should assert his authority by being autocratic in his relationship with Selina. The greatest hindrance to Selina's independence is not Gikere but his mother. Selina suffers physical abuse at the hands of her father and sexual abuse from villagers, but in the city she manipulates and uses men to her advantage, making them pay for all her needs, even swindling property from some of them. Conflict and tension in her marriage does not lead to her being thrown out of the home, as we would expect, rather Gikere is the one who is forced to move out and lodge at Heshima Trading Centre. Indeed the novel seems to suggest that Gikere, Karuga and Gaciru are Selina's victims, but that she is in turn a victim of wider

social forces which, though patriarchal, derive their power from both the collusion of both men and women. Selina therefore has some of her fiercest critics in Gikere's mother and in Maria, the nurse. Although Maria's criticism of Selina might be inspired by her interest in Gikere, as a possible husband, it is nevertheless not different in kind from that of other women in the village.

In terms of binary oppositions there are only two things that Njau makes clear distinctions about: the city is more empowering than the village and marriage is the most disempowering institution for women. Selina is therefore able to control and manipulate men in the city, but in the village men and the patriarchal system drive her mad. "In the city she had many admirers. She was successful in every way" (51), but in the village, where she had been subjected to both physical and sexual child abuse as a child, domestic violence after marriage reduces her "beauty, charm and... self confidence" (51). Njau's unmarried women are strong, independent-minded and propertied leaders in society, like Mariana in *The Scar* and, in spite of her faults, Gikere's mother whose husband abandoned her early in their marriage. The married women, such as Selina, her mother and Tetu in *Ripples*, are basically captives and victims of the institution. Selina's mother is driven to suicide by her husband, Tetu's husband, Kefa Munene, stages an accident that kills her and Selina is reduced to a neurotic enigma.

Margaret Ogola and Rebeke Njau differ in their understanding of the significance of marriage and their choice of the kind of spirituality they prescribe for Africa. Njau is critical of both Christianity and the institution of marriage but defensive of Kikuyu traditional religion without embracing every aspect it. In her interview with me she compared Christianity to opium used by people to throttle their feelings or to escape the

realities of life. In reference to marriage, an institution that Christianity holds as sacred and in which man's authority is only comparable to that of Christ over the church, Njau had this to say:

I never imagined that if I got married somebody could feel that they can possess my brain, that I must see things in his own way of seeing and someone who will not listen when I say this is the right way to follow. They do not want to listen. You know it is hard to have been brought up a liberated person in your mind, to get involved with somebody who has got these stereotypes; a woman should behave like this, a Kikuyu woman is very aggressive, you know, those stereotypes. And you are labelled aggressive because you have ideas and you want to put them forward. And somebody else does not want...so that is what I was saying. I do not want to be in prison, my brain to be imprisoned by anyone. I want to express myself, and you can see even in the prayer of a child, I have written the prayer of the child, did you see it? (Njau 1998).

Ogola, on the other hand, is a committed Catholic subscribing to the ideas of the sanctity of marriage, motherhood, and the family. In her interview with me she argued that motherhood is empowering, that she does not believe in broken families and that fathers should be the head of their families. When I asked whether she thought motherhood was empowering to women, she said:

So much so that I cause a bit of a scandal when I introduce myself and say first of all I am married, I have four children and it is because of these children that I get the inspiration to wake up every day and do what I need to do. I think I would be less than the person I would want to be if I did not have the children and my husband really. My approach to this issue is very African. I think that this is the most important thing in my life: that however many degrees I have, however successful my literary works, if I am a failure as a mother and my children go into the next generation without having achieved the wholesomeness, which you can only achieve from your mother actually, I would feel that I had failed miserably and nothing could replace that. I do not feel that my children have been a drawback in any way. On the contrary they have given me an impulse to go much further than I would have if I had been on my own perhaps with my husband. When I read all these things about the motherhood being a drawback and women needing to be liberated from motherhood so that we can compete with men in the work place I am a bit sad (Ogola 1998).

Married to fellow doctor George Ogola, with whom she has the four children mentioned in the quote above, Margaret Ogola is currently Executive Director of Family Life Counselling Association of Kenya. *The River and the Source*, which is her first novel,

won the 1995 Jomo Kenyatta prize for literature and the 1995 Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Africa region's best first book. She has also co-authored a non-fictional text with her husband titled *Educating in Love*. In spite of their ideological differences, Njau and Ogola in my opinion both present Afrocentric approaches to gender issues.

In *The River and the Source*, Margaret Ogola, like Njau, insists that the struggle for gender equity or even the emergence of strong revolutionary women in Africa is not a colonial legacy. Instead she constructs the journey toward gender freedom as a river whose source is traditional Africa and which flows from the past to the present. The narrative begins in the early 1900s with Akoko's marriage to chief Owuor Kembo, to whom she bears two sons and a daughter. The chief is not a conventional man, for he refuses to marry more wives in spite of his mother's insistence and is not keen on fathering many children. In 1918, Akoko's first son, Obura Kembo, dies in Tanzania while fighting in the first world war. When his father dies shortly thereafter, Obura Kembo's brother, Owang Sino, takes over the chiefhood in line with *chik* (tradition) which demands that if the chief dies, his first son or the closest male in his lineage takes over. Unfortunately the new chief chokes to death on a fishbone. Owang Sino's son, named Owuor after his grandfather, is only a toddler when his father chokes to death. Since *chik* cannot allow the infant Owuor to take over as he is too young, his uncle, Otieno Kembo, is obliged to take over.

According to tradition, Otieno Kembo should hold the position of chief until the young Owuor is old enough to take over. However, Otieno Kembo decides to keep power to himself and begins to appropriate his brother's as well as Akoko's wealth. In the words of the narrator, Akoko "[feels] the weight of injustice that women have felt since time immemorial in her male dominated world" (66) in the realisation that "as a woman, a

widow and sonless mother, the only male in her direct line being a little baby, she [is] greatly disadvantaged” (66). Although she knows the odds are against her, Akoko refuses to cave in, but opts to fight her brother head on by appealing to *sirikal*, the colonial government, for intervention. She embarks on a journey to Kisumu, present day Kisumu, where the colonial government headquarters are located. This journey marks the beginning of a struggle, for Akoko and her offspring, in pursuit of not only gender justice but also of a more humane society. Akoko therefore becomes the source of the spirit of resistance, the river which Ogola lets flow from generation to generation up to 1992 when it finds residence in Wandera, a Kikuyu who gets married into this Luo community. Akoko is the source of this great river that “starts its journey as a little stream which at first meanders around without any apparent direction, sometimes disappearing underground altogether, but always there, always moving towards the sea” (71).

Ogola’s main women characters are both subversive and conformist. I think the major strength of this novel is Ogola’s ability to create women who challenge long-held patriarchal values and stereotypes and their attendant injustice against women without operating outside their communities or disrupting the stability of the community. Indeed she may be accused of being idealistic in the way she refuses to pit women against men but rather wins the men over to the women’s cause without any direct connection between the men’s actions and a desire to make right what has been wrong for decades. The resistance to injustice against women is begun by Akoko, who goes to Kisumu to appeal to a male dominated administrative system against her brother-in-law’s attempt to manipulate tradition in order to disinherit her. The male white administrators, with the help of male local assistants, side with Akoko and decree that her brother-in-law be dethroned and that the elders’ council appoint another man to be a custodian of the

chief's stool till Akoko's grandson is old enough to take over. Although Akoko's grandson never lives to enjoy the fruits of his grandmother's victory, because hereditary chiefdoms are done away with completely, Ogola argues that Akoko's actions "opened new vistas for her family, which showed another world and the possibility of a different way" (85). Meanwhile Akoko leaves her matrimonial home and goes back to her father's land with all the wealth she had created when her husband was alive. The first person to follow the route opened by Akoko to a new world is Akoko's daughter, Nyambera. After having lost her husband, Nyambera is inherited in accordance with custom but she not only suffers conflict in the new marriage but also several miscarriages. In her attempt to deal with her pain, she decides to leave the village and seek a new religion: Catholicism. She moves to a catholic mission centre where she learns the new faith. The mission provides an opportunity for her daughter, Awiti, to become one of the very first women in Luo-land to obtain formal education and become a teacher. Awiti is so much of a pioneer in Luo-land that she becomes "an object of curiosity" because "a woman who worked at anything apart from tilling land and rearing children was a hitherto unknown phenomenon" (132). This, however, does not stop Mark Antony Oloo Sigu from wooing and marrying her and fathering seven children. The process of change initiated by Akoko climaxes with Wandia, Awiti's daughter-in-law, becoming the first woman in Kenya to be awarded a doctorate in medicine. This occasion seems to be the culmination of a struggle by women to create space for themselves in a male dominated system, without questioning or challenging the underlying philosophies behind the domination. In spite of the successes of her individual women characters, therefore, Ogola may be accused by some critics of failing to question and deconstruct the fundamental social and philosophical structures that undermine women's effort at liberation. Interestingly and not surprisingly, therefore, the men that matter to the women most, their husbands, support them. I think this is Ogola's

way of suggesting that women's battle against sexism should begin at home, and that in order to succeed here, the resistance need not be structured in terms of men against women. Ogola is also arguing that women, if given support and not constrained by any artificial social and patriarchal barriers can succeed in anything they put their minds to. In other words, Ogola's novel demonstrates that it is not tokenism and favouritism that women need to succeed, they just need free access to opportunities.

In this text, Ogola also seems to be arguing that tradition is not necessarily designed to oppress women and that men have been unjust to women in the way they have manipulated tradition. When Akoko therefore embarks on what we can rightfully call her feminist journey, she is not up against tradition but in pursuit of it. Ogola's novel, unlike Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* or Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, does not inscribe African feminists as up against a patriarchal system that pits men against women. In reference to patriarchy, Ogola (1998) suggests that its construction as a system designed to oppress women is wrong. In her words:

I do not see empowerment as a struggle between men and women. Neither do I see men as totally evil nor do I see the predicament that women find themselves in as deliberately evil intent on men's part, neither do I see patriarchy as an invention of men. But I see it very much as a biological necessity for which reasons many feminists would probably cut off my neck. And that is why they fight motherhood. Because you can only understand patriarchy in the context of motherhood. Because a woman who is with child or who is looking after a young one cannot also be out there fending and defending. This is a reality and when I am talking of defending and fending I am also talking about coming to the office to work. There are certain times when it is physically impossible to be in these other places. So if we do away with motherhood then there will be that kind of equality that they want. That is why there is such a bitter fight against "feminism" understood in the context of motherhood. If we women begin to feel that having children is slavery, then they have succeeded. There is no future in that! (Ogola 1998).

This quote might give the erroneous impression that Ogola thinks that patriarchy is a necessity in all its shapes and forms. On the contrary she uses her novel, *The River and the Source*, to identify negative elements of patriarchal practices and expectations

whose jettisoning she advocates and celebrates. She invites us to celebrate Akoko's rebellion against traditional requirements, during betrothal ceremonies, that the bride presents herself as a "...picture of demure shyness, her eyes fixed firmly on the floor her hands held together in front of her mouth" (22) suggesting silencing. Not only does Akoko walk in confidently, with measured steps and head held high with her hands at her sides, but she also chooses to gaze on her suitor as if to gauge and challenge him. She continues with this fearless refusal to be silenced in marriage where she speaks "...candidly on almost any subject" (27). Ogola's feminist Afrocentricity is reflected in her refusal to construct a chief summoning patriarchal assistance to force his wife to toe the line but rather suggests that Akoko's strong character impressed the chief and made him lose interest in all other women. Interestingly, it is his mother who organises a *Jadongo* (council of elders) to try and persuade the chief to marry another wife, especially because Akoko is not being prolific enough in terms of producing children.

Ogola acknowledges that traditional Luo society saw women's function as primarily reproductive. She argues that that view was propagated and sustained by both men and women, as is indicated by Chief Owuor Kembo's mother's insistence that he marries another wife since Akoko does not get pregnant as frequently as expected. Ogola invites us to celebrate the fact that in a society where "the purpose of female existence was marriage and child bearing" (120), where women were supposed to be ashamed or at least hide their brilliance; and where a woman doing anything else other than tilling land and rearing children was a strange and rare phenomenon, there still emerge such strong and resistant women without any foreign help. Awiti, Nyabera's daughter and Akoko's granddaughter, is a personification of the transcendence of limitations imposed by traditions. She does not manage to rise above these traditional forces because she goes to a missionary school, or because she gets help from a philanthropic

western missionary, black or white, but because she is brought up by strong, visionary Luo women.

Ogola is therefore neither against change nor suggesting that Africa does not need interventions to make her traditions progressive and gender sensitive. She is rather arguing that African women are well able to recognise injustice and to locate and seek help wherever that may be in the attempt to improve their situation. When Akoko first seeks the intervention of the colonial government, we should understand that she is not asking it to introduce and enforce its preferred new and Eurocentric system but rather that the government should intervene to withhold and enforce the traditional system. Indeed the white colonial administrator, the District Officer, is credited with having taken time to understand the traditional system. When Nyabera moves to the mission, though in pursuit of a foreign religion, it is not because a foreign missionary comes to her rescue but because black men had come to the village with news of a new “God who made meaning out of sorrow and suffering and who particularly liked the poor, the orphan and the widow” (92). Unlike Dangarembga’s Tambu, whose progression toward gender equity and liberation from the shackles of tradition is also a progression from a black dominated society to a white dominated one, even the mission that Nyabera goes to is not only run by blacks but there is no mention of the presence of white people. The priests and catechists are black. Ogola not only effectively resists the temptation to construct Afrocentric feminism in terms of opposition to Eurocentric feminism, but also pre-empts the possibility of being charged with imitating westerners by advocating for strong free women.

Ogola takes time to explain rather than repudiate many of the African customs that she makes reference to. Like Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, she argues that *Chik* (tradition)

“governed every aspect of the life of the people”, (80) and that it “was the glue which held the people together, thus preventing disintegration of the fabric of society, and chaos” (80). “Without *Chik* to tell each person where he fitted in the exact order of things, there would be confusion and apprehension” (80) For that reason, the “...majority were glad to avail themselves for the surety it offered; to do and to be done by” (80). Ogola therefore explains that according to tradition Owuor Kembo’s brother “should have married his brother’s widow and become guardian of the grandson and not owner of the chief’s stool” (80). In other words Ogola is demonstrating that there was a rational and reasonable explanation to what is pejoratively known in feminist discourses as wife inheritance. In reference to this practice, known as *Tero* among the Luo, Ogola says that a man who so inherited a widow, “...had no real rights over the woman, his job being that of siring children to maintain the dead man’s name and to keep his widow from wandering from man to man” (91), which is scandalous in the community. While interviewing Ogola in 1998, I asked her about various traditions considered oppressive to women, among them being wife inheritance, and this is what she said:

I think frequently it is a deliberate misrepresentation of an issue and removing it from its historical backgrounds for purposes of the war. All this liberation struggle is a battle, it is a war and there are people who are radically oriented in the same way as the more destructive kind of communism is radical. But when you take things like wife inheritance and female circumcision and all these things out of their historical contexts, then you can really deceive people.... It is the same thing with wife inheritance. It has to do with understanding the position of the woman in the home. A woman did move to the home of the husband but she was truly seen as an asset. So when a husband dies, you had two choices. A woman had either to return to her home and look for another husband or begin to look for someone to take care of her sexual needs in a manner that was totally unacceptable among Africans, you know, a date for the evening. This was simply not done. So what do you do next? The brother had to do a duty. It was a duty to his sister-in-law. Of course now, many things have come into it and one has to reconsider. I am not saying that one has to stick to one’s culture no matter what because things change, but it should not be seen as something that was done to oppress anybody. On the contrary it was to protect women and children (Ogola 1998).

In a way, *The River and the Source*, which is a historical text, not so much because its characters are based on real people but because of the way it is contextualised in terms of time and events in Kenya, is also Ogola's attempt to put some of these cultural practices in their social-historical perspective. Ogola, though a doctor by training, does not subject some of the clearly irrational practices in society to logical scrutiny as Walker does in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Nyabera, for example, loses three children before Awiti is born. Because of these previous losses, "...a little ceremony designed to confuse the evil spirits and to enhance the child's chances of survival" (89) is performed. The ceremony involves wrapping up the baby "...in a soft kid skin and plac[ing it]...at the main gate" (89) and then waiting for an old woman to "find" the baby. When an old woman finds such a baby she understands the "significance of the phenomenon" (89) and that it belongs to someone in the homestead beside whose gate the baby is found. She therefore takes the baby to the house claiming to have found it. She hands the baby over to the mother saying that "someone must have thrown it away [but that] since it was found near your home it must be the will of *Were* (God) for you to keep it" (89). Awiti, unlike her other siblings, for whom the ceremony is not performed, survives. Ogola is of course not arguing that there is a logical and scientific relation between Awiti's survival and the ceremony but that for the Luo community such ceremonies did at times seem to work and that for that reason they practised them.

Ogola's Afrocentricity lies not in her defence of African traditions but in her empathetic approach to them even when recording and endorsing their inevitable demise. Ogola is in fact so keen on presenting Africa positively that she lies in danger of being accused of not subjecting some of the traditions and practices to keen scrutiny. While she, for example, deconstructs the view of marriage and child bearing as the primary and ultimate function for women by creating articulate, independent-minded

but married career women, she at the same time seems to erase some of the problems one would expect in marriage. In the whole text, for instance, only Otieno Kembo treats his wives badly. Ogola hints that they respond in kind but we never get to know what in fact they do. Oloo Sigu subjects his wife to neglect and infidelity, but when Awiti finds out, she decides to keep silent about it for the sake of peace and the survival of the marriage. As a Catholic and family life campaigner, Ogola at times seems to sweep tensions within the family under the carpet. In Becky, the one character who seems ready to challenge some of the family values such as obedience to parents and faithfulness to husbands is erased by being infected with AIDS. Although Becky dies a rich woman who leaves a sizeable inheritance for her Courtney children she remains censored for her sexual freedom and for daring to rebel. The only option that Ogola leaves for those who reject marriage is religion, and specifically Catholicism, such as happens with Vera who joins Opus Dei as a non-marrying member, or Peter and Tony who both become priests.

In conclusion, Walker and Dangarembga are Eurocentric because besides being critical of African traditional practices, they project Europe and her values as the alternative one should embrace. Both seem to think that western missionaries have a central role to play in women's emancipation in Africa. Their texts imply that contact with the west either sparks African women's discontent and resistance to African patriarchy or that the contact educates, updates and gives substance to the sense of injustice that African women had previously felt but not been able to explain in terms of patriarchy. Although Dangarembga's Tambu begins her resistance before encountering any westerners, it is not until she meets her anglicised cousin that she begins to understand her oppression as conditioned by her femaleness in opposition to maleness. Walker and Dangarembga are both Eurocentric because they construct feminism in Africa as a fight against patriarchy

or in terms of men/women opposition. On the other hand, Njau and Ogola, though approaching the subject from different ideological perspectives, are Afrocentric because while critical of certain African traditions, they present the traditions empathetically and even suggest that some of them can form a basis for women's liberation. Their argument is that contravention of some African traditions has in fact been the basis of women's marginalisation and disinheritance in society. Secondly, they do not view gender conflicts in Africa as a men/women opposition but instead posit that some communally held values, sometimes insisted upon and effected by women, are oppressive to women. In other words, paradoxical as it may sound, the community, both men and women, are prisoners of some of their own cultural practices which means that the demise of these practices needs a combined male/female effort. Njau therefore suggests that people must look deep into their past and into themselves in order to chart the future while Ogola, like Ogot in *The Strange Bride*, advocates that men and women in marriage relationships need to stand up against the tyranny of some of their traditions. It is within this context that we need to interpret Oloo Sigu's refusal to entertain his mother's casting suspicion over his wife's inability to bear children. In the same way, Owuor Kembo refuses to marry many wives and shows no interest in having many children to the chagrin of the rest of the community.

Conclusion

This study's findings are not primarily new in content but in focus. While there have been a number of studies on other women writers from west Africa (Azodo, Ada Uzoamaka and Gay Wilentz, 1999; Umeh, Marie 1996; 1998) and South Africa (Dimitriu 2000, Yelin 1998) as far as I know there has not been any full length study of East African women writers, let alone any detailed study singly focused on a specific woman writer from the region. The focus of this thesis, feminism and Afrocentricity, is unique in the sense that it is not often that the two systems of thought and practice are combined or even associated with each other. When African male literary critics such as Ojo-ade (1983) have focused on feminism, it has been in order to demonstrate how advocates of feminism in Africa are simply imbibing western value systems. On the other hand, when western women critics have focused on African women writers in regard to gender or feminist issues, as in Stratton (1994) or Katherine Frank (1984, 1987), it has been to celebrate African women's criticism of, and departure from, African traditions to embrace feminism. In other words, the tendency has been to construct African women as either Afrocentric or feminist without the option of being both. I am pleased to note, however, that in the last decade more sophisticated studies, which pay attention to African women writers' self-constructs within African cultures have begun to emerge (Nnaemeka 1995, 1997a, 1997b; Nfah-Abbenyi 1997; Pauline Uwakweh 1998, 1995 and Gloria Chukukere 1994, 1995).

The findings of this thesis indicate that these late twentieth century studies are closer to the truth in understanding African women writers because these new studies are willing to pay attention to African women writers' self-construction. It seems to me that in the attempt to appropriate or force African women writers into an either/or mode, in the feminist and/or Afrocentric discourses, critics have failed to pay attention to what

the African women themselves say. Kolawole (1997) is correct when she says that “[f]or too long, the African woman’s reality has been inscribed from the west or by men” (10). African male critics have tended to listen to the discourses of western feminist critics and assume that African women writers are necessarily speaking the same language as western feminists, where African culture is too often seen as archaic, oppressive, and negative. On the other hand western feminist critics, perhaps in the belief that true feminism must conform to western notions of women’s liberation, have tended to read meanings in African texts that this thesis has found untenable. Katherine Frank (1987), for example, says that the African women writers studied for her paper, “Women without men: The feminist novel in Africa”, are trying to create a world without men, while Stratton argues that in Ogot’s fiction men fall apart to make room for women. When I confronted Grace Ogot with that assertion, she responded by saying that in her fiction men will never fall apart. It is possible to argue that authors are not necessarily the best critics of their own works, but chapter four of this thesis, focused on Ogot, reveals that although Ogot is critical of men, she in no way wants a world without them. As a matter of fact her characters are sometimes annoying in the way they are never able to rise above or even confront and challenge men and their sexist treatment of women. In *The White Veil*, for example, the reader is vexed by an Achola who insists on spending all her energy trying to marry a man who leaves her just because she will not engage in premarital sex. In such instances Ogot’s texts are disappointing in the way that the women characters seem to be prisoners of their social systems, with their choices limited to what their patriarchal societies have to offer as opposed to being able to reject those provisions which are oppressive and creating new opportunities for themselves even when their broad communities might not like these new choices. What cannot be denied, however, is that Ogot presents a convincing case

for allowing women to play more prominent roles than society currently allows, in the administration, allocation and distribution of the nation's resources.

The conclusion to this thesis is that in order to understand African women, and here specifically Kenyan women, and their stance in regard to feminism and Afrocentricity, the two ideologies also need revisiting. In my interviews with six Kenyan women writers, all of them, except Wanjiku Kabira, were adamant that they should not be described as feminists. Wanjiku Kabira, though not explicitly embracing the term, offered to explain why African women shy away from being called feminists, saying:

I suspect it has to do with first of all a misconception of what feminism is all about. I think feminism is about humanism. Only that humanism is a male concept and in that context human beings have not been women until feminism came into existence. Secondly, it is because feminism has been associated with radical women's movement in the U.S. I think it has to do with the concept of feminism that African women are familiar with, with the radical feminism. But also, I think, because the preoccupation of women in Africa could be different. Of course we are talking of local feminisms again. Depending on the issues and the interests of the community and the context: the cultural, the political and social context, there are certain issues which are priorities in Africa which may not be priorities in other places

In another article that Kabira co-authored with Oduor (1995), the two argue that "the women's movement is not a recent phenomenon in Kenya. Its origins lie in the pre-colonial period, when women formed self-help groups and work parties to assist one another during periods of economic and social stress" (189). They further argue that "[t]his tradition of forming women's groups to consolidate efforts for addressing problems has carried forward into the contemporary period" (189). In this paper, Kabira and Oduor confess that when they were first asked to do a paper on the women's movement, their pre-conceived notions of a movement as one exhibiting "common objective, continuity, unity and co-ordination" (187) nearly made them conclude that there was no such thing as the women's movement in Kenya. Upon reflection, however, they noticed that there was "intense activity going on... of women's groups meetings,

workshops, seminars and even individual women agitating for women's rights in the courts, in the media and on the streets" (187). They conclude that "...while conventional notions of social movements do not fully explain the women's movement in Kenya, the movement does exist and is vibrant with activity. However these efforts are often uncoordinated and fragmented, with individual women's groups developing specific strategies to suit local situations" (206). They say that they also "...noted that the movement has its roots in traditional forms of resistance to gender-based oppression" (206).

In many ways this is the same conclusion I reach in terms of feminism in Kenya. I do not choose to make a distinction between the women's movement and feminism, even though strictly speaking the two are different. My feeling is that the differences often identified are useful more for discursive purposes than for practical reasons. It is of course true that even in the west, feminism and the women's movement cannot be equated, but it is also true that the two cannot be dissociated. It is in this context that I conclude in this thesis that it should not be assumed there were no feminists in Africa prior to colonialism or even before the emergence of the term in the west. Indeed, as observed in chapter two, the term feminist was coined to describe women who were engaged in activities aimed at subverting long held societal norms. The argument here is that it is possible to be feminist in practice even though not cognisant of its existence as a philosophy. This is the way I conceptualise the writers I have discussed in this thesis who deny that they are feminists whilst their texts deal with feminist issues. They are, in the context of chapter two of this thesis, existentially feminist even though may not be feminists in terms of consciousness. In other words there is a difference between *being* and *consciousness*.

Like feminism, Afrocentricity also needs revisiting in order to understand the position occupied by the women writers studied. I have argued that Afrocentricity cannot be any longer interpreted in essentialist terms where Africans are defined by colour or even simply geographical location. The findings in this study reveal that Afrocentricity is a culturally based world-view that can be acquired as well as learnt and appropriated by any one regardless of race, creed or origin. Afrocentricity is not to be seen in opposition to Eurocentricity, or any other system for that matter. In the context of this thesis it is erroneous to credit Molefi Asante Kete with having founded Afrocentricity because Afrocentricity is not something that can be founded but rather it is a culturally based system of thought and practice. It is neither superior nor inferior to Eurocentricity. The two are simply different ways of constructing and understanding the world around us. I believe that I have established in this thesis that Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, though white, is Afrocentric in approach to women's issues in Kenya, while Alice Walker and Tsitsi Dangarembga in the texts examined here are not Afrocentric. Chapters five and six, which deal with Macgoye on the one hand and Walker and Dangarembga on the other respectively, demonstrate that it is paramount that Afrocentricity be separated from race.

In essence then, this study has established that in their proper contexts, feminism and Afrocentricity, where feminism is not unnecessarily yoked to its occidental historical origins and practice, and where Afrocentricity is not assumed to be some metaphysical essence only available to black Africans, can be usefully applied in the re-interpretation of African women's literature. Indeed it is my submission that when the two systems of thought are properly applied in the reading and criticism of African women's literature, it becomes no longer possible to treat African women writers as lightly as they have been previously dealt with in male critical discourses, or to see African women's

literature, as some western female critics have tended to do, as primarily an extension of western feminist ideological discourses.

In the context of feminism and Afrocentricity, divested of extremism, the creative works studied in this thesis confirm what some recent writers and critics have begun to observe. I am thinking of such publications as *African Feminism: The Politics of Survival in sub-saharan Africa* edited by Gwendolyn Mikell (1997); *Womanism and African Consciousness* by Mary E. Modupe Kolawole (1997); *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* edited by Obioma Nnaemeka (1998); and *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* by Catherine Obianjulu Acholonu (1995), among others, in which the consensus seems to be that the assumption that African women do not need feminism because they are already liberated is as wrong as the assumption that African women are silent, submissive sufferers whom western feminism or the women's liberation movement can awaken or has awakened. The writers studied also reveal that African women do not think that traditions and cultural practices are the major hindrance to women's liberation in Africa, but that it is modern masculinist interpretations of the same that are a problem. The creative works are a fictional rendition of what Obioma Nnaemeka (1997b) calls the "...transformations of African traditional institutions by 'modernity' and the manipulation of these transformatory stages by men to their own advantage thereby creating the pain of their female partners" (170). The women writers encourage African women to confront and challenge men on their stance in respect to traditions so that men are not allowed to get away with insisting on traditions when those traditions suit the men. Indeed the women writers reject the accusation that in demanding justice and equality they have deferred to western norms and betrayed their traditional value systems. They rather argue that women, in many cases, are having to fight for their own liberation because men have

abandoned traditional practices, and that men only subvert and appeal to these traditions when they want to silence women. These ideas are evident as demonstrated in the following summaries of my thesis chapters.

In chapter four, Grace Ogot argues that it is not the case that African women have been silent or even silenced, but that men have failed to listen to and act on what women say. The result has been that men, women and their families have suffered. She contests the argument that women have abandoned their African traditional practices in such stories as *Elizabeth*, *The White Veil* and *The Wayward Father*, by exploring how men have practised double standards in regard to matters of sexuality and marriage. Men want to engage in premarital sex yet expect to marry only virgins. They want to engage in sex outside marriage without the responsibility that a polygamous system would demand. Ogot's stance is taken a step further by Kabira whose stories, examined in chapter three, indicate that polygamy is not necessarily, as Katherine Frank (1987) argues, the most oppressive and "glaringly inequitable and sexist feature of traditional African society" (15). Instead, polygamy provides opportunities for decentring an oppressive man.

Chapter three may be considered controversial in the way it seeks to demonstrate that African women writers' specific issues of concerns are not the same as those of their western counterparts interested in gender issues in Africa. Out of the twenty-six stories studied, none of them is focused on such institutions or practices as female circumcision, wife inheritance, bride price in Africa, or even the evils of polygamy. It is interesting that while the women writers acknowledge that marriage is frequently an oppressive institution to women, nearly all of them seem to think that polygamous marriages are not any more troublesome than monogamous marriages. Rather than traditional institutions, cultures and practices, the women are more concerned with

issues relating to rape, domestic violence, the legal and judicial system in regard to marriage, unfair representation in government, and economic empowerment. This stance is reinforced in chapter five, on Macgoye, where she revisits the history of Kenya to show how women contributed to the freedom struggle but never reaped the benefits of *uhuru* (freedom) together with their men. Macgoye is the only writer among the women I have studied for this dissertation to devote some of her works to exploring, deconstructing and reconstructing a traditional institution, the concept of home. I think this may be arguably attributed to the fact that although she has cultivated a sense cultural literacy vis-à-vis Luo traditional culture, her European background means she had to create her own concept of home. She is therefore able to view the concept in a much wider sense than Macgoye argues that home, specifically among the Luo, has been a patriarchal institution that women need to reconstitute or recreate to suit themselves. She echoes Ogot (1998) who argues that in the wake of changing economic and sociological times, the Luo practice of burying women who die single outside their father's homestead must be abandoned because it suggests that single women are homeless. In other words the tendency to assume that home for a woman can only be in her marital land needs to be stopped.

Finally, Rebeka Njau and Margaret Ogola, in chapter six, affirm a dominant theme in all the works studied, that the struggle for African women's freedom, much as it may have benefited from the international women's movement, has its roots in Africa. Njau's heroine, Selina, is poignantly aware of male domination and the injustice of it, even though she has had no contact with the west. Njau especially situates her call for women's freedom within an African spiritual framework, arguing that in order to be free, a people must first understand and take pride in their history and cultural context. In the same vein but to a less radical extent, Ogola traces women's struggle for freedom

to the early 1900s, prior to colonialism, to demonstrate that the struggle for women's freedom, now evident in society, is like a river whose source is generations past. In many ways Ogola's novel echoes what Kabira's text, *Our Mother's Footsteps: Reclaiming Women's Space in Politics*, which is in turn evocative of Alice Walker's *In Search of our Mother's Gardens*, in insisting that contemporary women's struggle for freedom is a continuation of resistance begun by their mothers and grandmothers. Ogola and Macgoye's revisiting of history to unearth women whose stories have not been told before and who were active, conscious and eloquent against women's oppression is another way of articulating what Kabira told me when I interviewed her in 1998 on this subject. She said:

We are seeing ourselves and our sisters who are our agetates, along a history where our mothers, not our wives, since we do not have any, but where our mothers have struggled to achieve what we have and where we have to continue the struggle for our daughters. So it is a historical image (Kabira, 1998).

Kabira, Ogola, Njau, Macgoye and to a certain extent, Ogot, are arguing that the struggle for women's freedom did not begin with the advent of colonialism, they are seeing the struggle as a river from the past, flowing in the present and into the future, which may pick other tributaries along the way, some of which could be foreign, to enrich itself. In other words, the Afrocentricity of feminism in Africa lies both in its contemporary practice as well as at its source. Their kind of feminism is more of what Nnaemeka calls nego-feminism because it is within and parallel to other social systems rather than outside or in opposition to the main frameworks that hold African societies together. Women are negotiating for inclusion in the process of community development as well as in reaping the benefits thereof.

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