

**WOMEN SPEAK:
THE CREATIVE TRANSFORMATION OF
WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

by

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submitted in accordance with the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts in the subject of English
at the University of Pretoria

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October 1999

*Sketch taken from original illustration by Mick Armson
on cover of *The Stillborn* (Longman Edition 1988)*



To my parents

Mersina and Pandeli

Acknowledgements

I express my sincerest gratitude to

- **Professor Rosemary Gray of the Department of English and the supervisor of this study for her patience, unfailing support and the inspiration and guidance which she has provided selflessly in the pursuit of academic excellence.**
- **The members of my family for their constant encouragement during my studies and for their unconditional love and warmth at all times.**
- **Basil Lazarides who joined this academic journey in its closing stages and who represents so much that is dignified and meaningful in the union between the sexes.**

Σας ευχαριστώ



SUMMARY

This study seeks to focus on the total female experience of African women and the reappropriation of a more authentic portrayal of the identity of women in African literature. In this dissertation, a chapter is devoted to each of the female protagonists in the three novels selected for discussion which are *One is Enough* (1981) by Flora Nwapa, *Second-class Citizen* by Buchi Emecheta (1975) and *The Stillborn* (1988) by Zaynab Alkali. Each chapter is named after the woman whose transformation it explores and the chapters are organised in a chronological sequence, that is, in the order that the writers of the texts were first published as authors of African literature, rather than according to the publication date of the text under discussion.

The mode of treatment of the texts is dictated primarily by the womanist thrust and the central question of the way in which each of the female characters transcends the triple jeopardy of colour, class and gender to become a creative non-victim. The epithet 'creative transformation' in the title, therefore, describes the emergence of female characters in African writing who overturn the literary characterisation of the one-dimensional African woman who is a 'shadowy figure who hovers on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking' and 'plaiting' hair (Frank, 1987:14).

The theoretical approach adopted for this study is largely of an eclectic nature but every effort has been made to establish a strong sense of the authenticity and credibility of the African woman's experience. In other words, the three texts



chosen have been treated as both essentially social realist and African feminist texts read from a womanist perspective. The term ‘womanist’ is particularly valuable in the context of this study. The definition of womanism used in this study is that forwarded by critics such as Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1985) who states that ‘womanism believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism’ but that ‘unlike feminism’, womanism ‘wants meaningful union between women and men and will wait for men to change their sexist stance’.

The findings of this study show that the female protagonists achieve transformation not by reforming patriarchal systems, but by being creative and reappropriating their own identities within these often antagonistic systems. That is, the women achieve a measure of fulfilment and a strong sense of their own individuality within an imperfect context. Particularly in their individual responses to the experiences of marriage and motherhood in a traditional context and in their seeking an authentic identity, the characters in the novels studied create a framework that enables them to be the women they want to be and not the women society would like them to be: Amaka bears twins fathered by Izu, a Catholic priest; Adah – a mother of five – leaves a violent relationship to pursue a career as a writer and Li, after establishing an independent academic life, returns to her errant husband in the hope that they can rebuild their life together.

KEY WORDS

AFRICAN WOMEN

NIGERIA

STEREOTYPES

CREATIVE
TRANSFORMATION

IDENTITY

WOMANISM

POST-COLONIAL

EMECHETA

ALKALI

NWAPA



OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie poog om te fokus op die totale ervaring van Afrikavrouens en die herbenadering tot 'n meer geloofwaardige uitbeelding van die identiteit van vrouens in Afrikaliteratuur. In hierdie verhandeling word 'n hoofstuk elk aan elkeen van die hoofkarakters in die drie romans wat vir bespreking gekies is, afgestaan, naamlik, *One is Enough* (1981) deur Flora Nwapa, *Second-class Citizen* (1975) deur Buchi Emecheta en *The Stillborn* (1984) deur Zaynab Alkali. Elke hoofstuk is vernoem na die vrou wie se transformasie ondersoek word, en die hoofstukke volg chronologies. Dit volg in die orde waarin die skrywers van die tekste vir die eerste maal gepubliseer is as outeurs van Afrikaliteratuur, en nie volgens die publikasiedatum van elke teks nie.

Die benaderingswyse tot die behandeling van die tekste word hoofsaaklik gedikteer deur die 'womanist thrust' (beywering vir gelyke regte) en die kernvraag, naamlik die wyse waarop elk van die vrouekarakters die driedubbele juk van kleur, klas en geslag transendeer om skeppende nie-slagoffers te word. Die epiteton 'creative transformation' tot die titel, beskryf dus die opkoms van vroeke karakters in Afrikaliteratuur wat die literere karakterisering van die een-dimensionele Afrikavrou – wat beskryf word as 'n 'shadowy figure who hovers on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking' en 'plaiting hair' (Frank, 1987:14) – omverwerp.

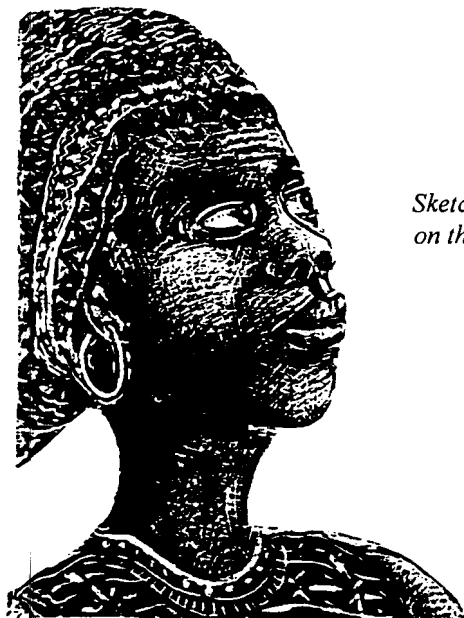
Die teoretiese benadering tot die studie is grootlik eklekties van aard, maar daar word ook gepoog om 'n sterk gewaarwording van die oorspronklikheid en

geloofwaardigheid van die ervaring van die Afrikavrou te benadruk. Die drie tekste word dus essensieel as sosiale-realistiese en as Afrika-feministiese tekste vanuit 'n 'womanist' perspektief gelees. Die term 'womanist' is van besondere waarde in hierdie studie. Die definisie van 'womanism' word voorgestaan deur kritici soos Ogunyemi Chikwenye, wat beweer dat 'womanism believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism' maar dat 'unlike feminism' **womanism** 'wants meaningful union between women and men and will wait for men to change their sexist stance'. Die uitkomst van hierdie studie toon dat die vroulike hoofkarakters transformasie bereik – nie deur die middel van transformasie van die patriargale stelsels nie – maar deur die kreatiewe skepping en deur die herbeskouing van hul eie identiteit binne hierdie antagonistiese stelsels. Die vrouens bereik 'n mate van vervulling en 'n sterk gewaarwording van hulle eie identiteit teen 'n onvolmaakte agtergrond. Die karakters in die romans skep formules wat hulle in staat stel om die soort vrouens te wees wat hulle wil wees en nie wat die gemeenskap wil he hulle moet wees nie. Die geskied aan die hand van hulle individuele reaksies met betrekking tot hul ervaring van die huwelik en moederskap in 'n tradisionele konteks, en in hul soektog na 'n geloofwaardige identiteit. Amaka gee geboorte aan 'n tweeling waarvan Izu, 'n katolieke priester, die vader is; Adah – 'n moeder van vyf – verlaat haar stormagtige huwelik om 'n loopbaan as 'n skrywer op te neem, en Li keer terug na haar sondige eggenoot, na die vestiging van 'n onafhanklike akademiese loopbaan, en met die verwagting dat hulle hul lewens saam kan herophou.



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*Sketch taken from original illustration by Mick Armson
on the cover of *The Stillborn* (Longman Edition 1988)*

INTRODUCTION

The female character has emerged from her cocoon,
basking free to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder.
Helen Chukwuma

Traditionally the experiences of marriage and motherhood dominate the lives and identity of women in Africa. This is not surprising when one considers the enormous ‘weight of the structural, cultural and ideological processes’ which bears upon these women (Gordon,1990:35).¹ In her compelling text, *Feminist Mothers* (1990), Tuula Gordon suggests that such is the heaviness of social pressure upon women that it would ‘predispose anybody towards conformity’ (35). The reference, here, is to black African women, whose liberation – generally speaking – has been delayed compared with that of their white sisters. Despite the above-mentioned unrelenting pressure, however, women *do* rebel and create personal lives ‘within the framework of possibilities and limitations set by structures and cultures’ (Gordon,1990:17). What Gordon terms women’s ‘desubordination’ (18) finds expression through organised ‘collective action or acts of everyday rebellion, which may be individualistic and isolated, but nevertheless constitute a significant phenomenon’. In the three novels (all by black African women writers) chosen for study in this dissertation, the ‘essential female’ (Chukwuma,1989:3) *does* emerge. According to Helen Chukwuma (1989:2), and in this context, the ‘timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman’ is replaced by ‘a full-rounder (sic) human being, rotational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own’ (2). Hence, the epithet

‘creative transformation’ has been chosen to describe the emergence of female characters in African writing who journey ‘towards a new dawn for women and for Africa’ (James,1990:4).

It is not, by any means, the rejection of marriage and motherhood *per se* which this dissertation investigates, but rather some of the expectations, which surround women’s identity, particularly in relation to marriage and motherhood in a traditional West African context, that are interrogated. The novels of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Zaynab Alkali offer an alternative perspective of female characterisation in contemporary African literature than that of the demure, obeisant wife and mother and are received ‘as a welcome diversion from the [African] canon’ (Chukwuma,1989:2). Of course, a decade later, Chukwuma’s observation is a little dated, but it nonetheless serves to point to a newer direction in characterisation in writing in Africa. Helen Chukwuma, writer of the article ‘Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta’ (1989), imbues the reappropriated depiction of the African woman in literature with the epiphanic resonance of the proem to this opening chapter: ‘The female character has emerged from her cocoon, basking free to a mixed reception of surprise and wonder’ (1989:2). Similarly, Katherine Frank explains in ‘Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa’ (Jones,1987:15) that the feminist novel in Africa, which, she declares, is not only ‘alive and well’ but is, in general, ‘more radical’ and ‘even more militant’ than its ‘western counterpart’, overturns the literary characterisation of the African woman from her former position as

‘someone’s daughter or wife or mother’ - a ‘shadowy figure which hovers on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking’ and ‘plaiting’ hair.

Traditionally considered critical rites of passage, marriage and motherhood are often used by society as the measuring instruments by which to gauge a woman’s social development and success. Gordon explains that ‘the social construction’ of motherhood and marriage ‘runs very deep, and is embedded in our psycho-social make-up’ (1990:61) with the result that a ‘particular cultural, social and structural construction’ is ‘presented as natural and instinctual’ (31). Without undermining the power of emotion attached to both marriage and motherhood, the female protagonists in the three novels selected for discussion ultimately reject the stereotypes held up as the only possibilities for women by their respective societies in favour of identities and experiences they consider more fulfilling and meaningful. These women ‘transform’ their identities and ‘create’ their ‘individual biographies in the context of social relations’ (Gordon,1990:1). Their struggle to reconstruct their lives differently, however, is a noteworthy one as they are obliged, it seems, to ‘use the same ingredients’ (35). That is, while women may choose different roles, these roles (mother, wife, mistress, for example) are created by and still firmly entrenched within what Gordon delineates as ‘the framework of oppression’ (29).

The central themes of the dissertation, including the transformation of women and what could be termed the characters’ debunking of the expectations placed before them, may be viewed as feminist since these narratives focus on the

resistance of women against a system that Carol Boyce-Davies (1994:28), in a different context, refers to as the ‘objectification of women in society, literature, art and culture’.

In fact, Boyce-Davies’s definition of feminism is particularly pertinent to the argument of the present study as she defines feminism as ‘a politics of possible transformation that resists the objectification of women’ (28). Yet, Tuula Gordon’s definition of feminism is perhaps more valuable in the context of this study, for she describes feminism as ‘a politics of transformation, as a way of finding a voice’ (36). In essence, the definitions are the same, but the addendum in Gordon’s definition transforms the second part of the definition from a negative into a positive, from defence into reappropriation and action. As Gordon astutely adds, ‘Feminism is concerned with **redefining** the world on the basis of the location and experiences of women, noting their oppression and subordination’ (37) [own emphasis]. Gordon’s proposition prompts the reader to think about the women in these novels as possible initiators of a new world-view or as reconstructors of their own worlds. The women certainly endeavour to reconstruct their own lives even though they are often ‘obliged to use the same ingredients’ (35); but the redefinition of the world, as suggested, may well be a hypothetical ideal canvassing support from the feminist perspective alone.

The term ‘feminist’ in classifying particular literary works gives rise to debate even among the women writers themselves. For example, when Zaynab Alkali, author of *The Stillborn* (1984), was interviewed by Adeola James for her book *In*

their own voices (1990), Alkali suggested that to view the writing of African women as feminist would be erroneous. Alkali continued that, in her opinion, the women's movement often interfered with women's writing (31). Alkali claimed further that her inspiration for writing was found in the quotidian 'happenings' around her and that the 'physical, psychological and moral set-up' of her society (31) determined what she wrote. Molar Ogundipe-Leslie vehemently refutes such 'denials' in her article 'The Female Writer and Her Commitment' (1987). She claims that women writers in Africa have been successfully intimidated by 'male ridicule' and 'aggression', with the result that some women writers have become 'apologetic and have given the term *feminist* a bad name' (11). For Ogundipe-Leslie, 'nothing could be more feminist than the writings of these women writers in their concern for and deep understanding of the experiences and fates of women in society' (11).

If one accepts, for the purposes of this study, the humane definition of feminism by Carol Boyce-Davies, which is quoted above and which foregrounds the notion of woman as subject rather than object, then writers like Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali definitely contribute to the possibility of transformation for the women in African texts. Rather than permitting representatives of their gender to submit to a common-victim syndrome, these writers transform the protagonists in their novels into creative non-victims. As suggested by the selected texts, a common-victim syndrome prevails when the female character allows her own personhood to be subsumed in favour of either the male or the clan and his/its expectations and

values. That is, a woman's 'aspiration to self-sovereignty is subordinated' (Boyce-Davies,1994:29).

It is for these reasons that the texts discussed here can more usefully be described as 'womanist' rather than simply 'feminist'. In resisting what Boyce-Davies terms 'the objectification of women' (1994:28), Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali portray characters whose action is womanist rather than purely feminist. The concept of womanism is defined by Chikwenye Ogunyemi (1985): 'Womanism believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism (sic); unlike feminism, it wants meaningful union between men and women and will wait patiently for men to change their sexist stance'.² In this context, both Amaka and Li exhibit a womanist approach as they journey through transformation. Amaka establishes a deeply respectful and life-changing union with Izu, a Catholic priest and the father of her children, while Li chooses to return to her husband, Habu, in the hope that they can find emotional fulfilment interdependently.

It is perhaps naive to assume that the emergence of what is described by Beatrice Stegeman as the 'New Woman' in African literature (Jones,1987:17) is not without turmoil and conflict. In choosing not to submit to a common-victim syndrome, the 'educated' and often 'highly-Westernised heroines' (16) of the selected texts highlight the 'very new and still tenuous' (16) status of the African 'New Woman'. As Frank (Jones,1987:17) explains in her earlier-mentioned article 'Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa', the portrayal of the respective heroines, such as Amaka, Adah and Li, in the three novels selected for

discussion, often throws into question the African woman's 'allegiance to her culture - her African identity - and her aspiration for freedom and self-fulfilment'. The reader of these texts is obliged to consider and to question whether or not the African woman's choice to 'realise her potential for happiness' (Jones,1987:17) is to reject automatically the 'assumed continuity of the clan' and to work, therefore, without tradition rather than to 'fit into a stereotyped tradition'.³ Some critics of African literature may conclude that the 'long standing debate over whether African women were better off in a traditional, usually rural' context or whether fulfilment is to be found in 'today's Westernised urban centres' remains a 'vexed issue' (Jones,1987:16). Katherine Frank herself, however, concludes that the literary text offers a unique opportunity for the resolution of such an issue as writers are free to investigate several possibilities through their fictionalised representations of women: '...it is to fiction that we must continue to turn. Imagined worlds are more potent than real ones.... They reconcile feminist aspiration and African integrity' (33). Further comment on the negotiation by African women between what Frank calls 'the claims of tradition and modernisation' (18) is offered in later chapters in the dissertation when the heroine of each text is considered individually.

This study ventures to suggest that female protagonists such as Amaka, Adah and Li are compelled by their awakening consciousness to pursue transformation and fulfilment but that while they 'continue to dream', they may discover or be reminded that not all their 'dreams are born alive': 'Some are aborted. Others are stillborn' (Alkali,1988:104). What is significant for the development of the

female protagonist, however, is the recognition and acceptance of a destiny that is to a great extent personally selected and directed and therefore meaningful.

When the female protagonists set themselves apart from the other women in the community, that is, from the members of the common-victim syndrome, they plunge headlong into the process that will finally afford them the 'recognition' of their identity and 'role in the world' which, for M H Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1971:113), is one of the characteristics of the self-actualised individual in a bildungsroman. In many respects, Amaka, Adah and Li do exhibit the characteristics of the 'feminist pilgrim' (Jones,1987:14) and their stories echo 'the quest motif', that is, the heroine's journey into 'the great world' where she slays her patriarchal 'dragons' (14). Frank acknowledges that clichéd as such literary devices may seem, 'they clearly answer the needs of countless women experiencing' (14) a social reality. While Western women writers have explored extensively the quest motif, the African novel, having been until recently the domain of men, has not focused on 'personal or domestic themes' of importance to women (14). So it is to writers like Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali that one turns 'to find female characters with a destiny of their own' (15).

In order to understand further the characterisation and experiences of black women in African literature, a reading of a collection of papers collated for the first seminar on *Women in Nigeria* in May 1982 proves valuable. In one of these papers, 'The Role of Women in Nigerian Society: The Media', Theresa Nweke (1985:201) argues that in 'classical colonialism, the struggle is based on regaining the land, the people's traditions and the old way of life' and yet, Nweke

continues, these are the very same variables that colonise women. For Nweke, most women in Nigeria ‘have no place in the social structure, not even at the bottom’ (201).

Ogundipe-Leslie also contributed significantly to the above seminar, especially in her paper titled ‘Women in Nigeria’. She explains that Nigeria is ‘a third world, neo-colonial nation’ (Bappa,1985:4) and that while women’s reactions do differ from class to class, all Nigerian women are affected by ‘the insecurity of polygynous marriage, the social compulsion to have children, the denial of safe, legal contraceptives and abortion’ and ‘the load of domestic work’ (4). The factors cited by Ogundipe-Leslie represent a synthesis of examples of traditional society’s collective expectations (‘the social compulsion to have children’) and modern neo-colonial realities (‘the denial of safe, legal contraceptives’).

A reading of the selected texts urges the reader of African literature to consider closely the ways in which women’s identities are defined in relation to men and how stereotyped notions of what women’s roles are meant to be are frequently perpetuated. Like Li in *The Stillborn*, both Adah (*Second-class Citizen*) and Amaka (*One is Enough*) understand early on in their journeys to transformation that they must ‘resist the role of the victim that is the woman’s traditional lot’ if they are to make the most of their ‘potential’ (Alkali,1988:xiv).

Because terminology is often subtly nuanced, some explanation of the terms used in this study and its title is deemed necessary. The word ‘identity’ is a

problematic term on account of the theoretical complexity inherent in its usage. Especially in the context of the African woman, the concept of identity assumes a series of 'boundary crossings' (Boyce-Davies,1994:4). African women are presented as fighting for recognition and expression in two respects. They seek a voice as women *and* as members of the *black* community. These African women are aware of the intricacy of their striving for recognition as, if they seek a voice as women only, they fracture the focus of the black community in overcoming colonial hegemonic forces and racial oppression: 'black women can't separate themselves from black men on the cases of racism' (Gordon,1990:120). The identity of the black woman is thus affected by a double bind. Black women generally agree that it is best to remove the restrictions placed upon them on account of their colour before they can concentrate on women's issues alone. In an interview with Tuula Gordon, Amarjit (her family name is not mentioned), a women's project worker and mother of two boys elaborates from a more sociological perspective: 'What I would fight first and foremost are issues that affect black people, men and women, because racism is uppermost in my mind, and women's issues are second to that because of what I am... I don't just demand things because I am a woman, but because I am a black woman' (Gordon:140). It is also on account of the complexity of the question of identity that black women generally rejected the Women's Liberation Movement which they perceived to support 'white ideology' (140): 'I am from a Third World country, and there are changes which a lot of the silent women, as I call them, have made that has nothing to do with the movement.... I am looking at it from a different background' (141). Acknowledging that the concept of identity is complex (at the

very least), Charles Rycroft's explanation (1968), while relatively simple, is useful in signposting the investigation in this study. In *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (1968:68), Rycroft explains that the 'sense of identity is probably synonymous with self awareness' and that 'the search for identity' may be 'a search for a role or for enhanced self awareness'.

The identity of black women recently received world literary attention on account of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison's words when she accepted the coveted award. Morrison expressed that she felt 'blacker than ever and more woman than ever' even though she was keenly aware that she had come to represent so many parts of society. In an interview with the *Weekly Mail and Guardian* newspaper (3 - 8 April 1998), Morrison articulates the concerns of most black women writers, including Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali, by emphasising, in contrast to Amarjit earlier, that the work of women writers from previously colonised societies is not only or as much about race, but about gender particularly. Morrison explains that her writing is informed by the range of emotions and perceptions which black women have to access and which is so much greater than any accessed by individuals who are neither black nor women. Echoing Morrison's sentiments, when Adeola James interviewed African women writers for her touchstone text *In their own voices* (1990:1), James concluded that 'two major, irreversible, though accidental facts' affected the creativity of the writers she interviewed - the fact that they were African or black and women.

Other important terms in this study are ‘transformation’ and ‘character’. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* describes ‘transformation’ as a process in which ‘a thorough or dramatic change in the form, outward appearance or character is made’ (1991:1296). The terms ‘transformation’ and ‘character’ which are closely interlinked for the purposes of this study are less polemical than the term ‘identity’. From a literary perspective, it is understood that a ‘character’ is a person in a narrative work who is ‘endowed with moral and dispositional qualities’ (Abrams,1971:21) and that characters may ‘undergo a radical change, either through a gradual development or as a result of an extreme crisis’. The ‘change’ referred to may be seen as ‘transformation’. In the novels, the transformation of the characters is precipitated largely by their own awareness of their relation to marriage and motherhood, which are in fact vehicles or catalysts for significant development despite their initial appearance to the contrary.

As it is the identity and the creative transformation of African women that are key issues for discussion in this dissertation, it is necessary too to state clearly that the term ‘African’ as it is used in the dissertation and its title does not identify or describe one who is African by birth. The distinction is a critical one as, until recently, the experiences of those born on the African continent have been historically and socially diverse and disparate and have largely been determined politically by constitutional stances toward race. Therefore, it seems necessary to assert that the transformation examined here is the conscious change effected by *black* African women over their identities, lives and experiences.

The texts chosen for examination are relatively recent texts written by black African women. Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali, all Nigerian by birth, present what they consider authentic characterisations of African women. Writing as African women about African women, these authors enable the reader to understand and witness more closely the identities and experiences of African women especially in the context of rapid and strenuous social change as Africa moves beyond the colonial period and through the post-colonial and neo-colonial phases.

The novels and the journeys of the three heroines are viewed through the same thematic lens that focuses on the African woman, particularly in relation to the social constructs of marriage and motherhood. In their quest for transformation, Amaka (*One is Enough*), Adah (*Second-class Citizen*) and Li (*The Stillborn*), are portrayed as having to engage in what Jungian scholar, Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992), refers to as 'psychic-archaeological digs' (3). In these terms, the characters have to re-visit 'the ruins of the female underworld' (6) or woman's deepest nature in order to approach a fuller expression of self and to move beyond the limitations imposed upon them by society: 'A woman's issues of soul cannot be treated by carving her into a more acceptable form as defined by an unconscious culture, nor can she be bent into a more intellectually acceptable shape by those who claim to be the sole bearers of consciousness' (6). The use of the word 'unconscious' to describe 'culture' is potentially problematic because it raises the question about whether or not Estes rejects the notion that the identity of women is culturally determined. While Estes speaks of the elusive 'issues of the soul' when investigating women's concerns, Gordon speaks explicitly of 'the



reinforcement of gender patterns' (24). Furthermore, Gordon believes that 'reproduction and motherhood are social as well as biological' and that 'all women are potential mothers; their vocation as women is defined in terms of reproduction. Thus all women have a relationship to motherhood, even if a negative one' (45). This perception of women's relationship to motherhood is especially important, for example, for Amaka in *One is Enough* (1981) by Flora Nwapa. Amaka cringes at her mother-in-law's burning accusation: 'I shouted it from the rooftops. I told Obiora not to marry you, that you were going to be barren' (5). Following this sobering episode, Amaka realises that she has to find a way in which to liberate herself from the 'conventional definitions of her gender' (Stratton, 1994:91) and the biologically based role of motherhood so that her identity *can* be meaningful and independent of former expectations.

In this dissertation, a chapter is devoted to each of the protagonists in the three novels selected for discussion. Each chapter is named after the woman whose transformation it explores and the chapters are organised in a chronological sequence, that is, in the order that these writers were first published as authors of African literature: Nwapa (1966), Emecheta (1972) and Alkali (1984), rather than according to the publication date of the texts under discussion.

In researching the topic, a number of theoretical approaches or schools of thought have been visited. The approach finally adopted is largely of an eclectic nature but every effort has been made to establish a strong sense of the authenticity and credibility of the African woman's experience. In other words, these texts have

been treated as both essentially social realist and African feminist texts read from a womanist perspective. This has been achieved by using as a touchstone what black women across Africa and the world have to say not only about being a woman but also about being a black woman. The focus of critical research therefore is essentially the texts of African writers and critics, with women writers in the diaspora and other previously colonised societies providing useful confirmation of the claims made. In addition, theoretical texts, which are usually classified under 'psychology' and 'sociology', provide a complementary and invaluable perspective on how women can and do transform themselves. These texts include titles such as *Women who run with the wolves* (1992) by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, already alluded to, and the earlier mentioned *Feminist Mothers* (1990) by Tuula Gordon among others.

In the course of this study, certain trends have emerged. For example, the writers whose texts are examined appear to align themselves with an interest in and comprehension of the total female experience rather than with the more radical role reversal feminism that agitates for the eclipse of the patriarchy, with its phallogentric autocracy, in favour of a new order of matriarchal totalitarianism. Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali are, in fact, more concerned with the immediate possibility of transformation and deliverance from what they perceive as oppressive prescribed social expectations rather than with the politics of power. Certainly transformation cannot be pursued before the hierarchies, which restrain women, have been thoroughly investigated, but it will be seen that the leading female protagonists in the novels achieve transformation not by reforming the

patriarchal systems, but by being creative and reappropriating their own identities or what Estes terms, as quoted earlier, ‘a woman’s issues of soul’ within these often antagonistic systems. That is, they achieve a measure of fulfilment and a strong sense of their own individuality within an imperfect context. Rather than harnessing their energies to revolutionise an entire patriarchal world-view, they are consciously innovative within the realm of their own experience and achieve freedom for themselves by creating a framework that enables them to be the women they choose to be and not the women society would like them to be. It is precisely this subtle shift in emphasis that gives rise to the choice of the defining phrase – ‘creative transformation’ – in the title to this dissertation.

Another trend that has become apparent is that the African novels discussed in this study are endowed with a character of their own. Emerging from a continent that was subjected to colonial rule for more than a century, the female writer in Africa, as intimated earlier in this introduction, finds that her commitment to her subject is complex: ‘The female writer should be committed in three ways: as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person; and her biological womanhood is implicated in all three’ (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987:10). Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie further maintains in her article ‘The Female Writer and Her Commitment’ (1987), already mentioned, that ‘one of the commitments of the female writer’ should be the correction of ‘false images of the woman in Africa’ and that in order to do this, writers must ‘know the reality of the African woman, must know the truth about African women and womanhood’ (8). In other words, the African woman writer is obliged to adopt the role of corrective chronicler of personal and social

communal experience rather than that of imaginative raconteur of fictive tales of Africa. Her purpose is, at once, reactive and ameliorative, and so womanist rather than merely feminist (as discussed earlier). In addition, Ogun-dipe-Leslie believes that 'female writers cannot usefully claim to be concerned with various social predicaments in their countries or in Africa without situating their awareness and solutions within the larger global context of imperialism and neo-colonialism' (1987:12).

It is significant to underline, once again, at the outset of this study that, in their endeavour to give women in African literature a voice, the writers of the selected texts do *not* idealise the journey of transformation. In their tribute to the spirit of 'the undefeatable womanhood of Africa' (Ogola,1994:acknowledgements), Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali permit the reader to witness the difficulty with which Amaka, Adah and Li grapple with the dichotomies that face them as they embrace what are perceived by the community to be the unorthodox values and opportunities of the neo-colonial African metropolis. The argument is that the writers liberate the voices of African women, who, according to Adeola James, have been so rarely listened to because the 'noises of men' have drowned them out 'in every sphere of life, including the arts' (1990:6).

Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali propel their characters forward to seek a new destiny, albeit one fraught with complexities of its own, that perhaps their mothers, as African women of an earlier generation, would not have been able to contemplate. This contemplation of broader possibilities enables the women in

African literature to avoid being held hostage by a value system such as that reflected in a Ghanaian newspaper, the *Daily Graphic*: ‘A woman may gain the whole world but she would have lost her soul if she doesn’t become a male’s extension or somebody’s mother’ (Frank,1987:17). Implicit in this statement is the pressure, referred to earlier, on women to conform to specific societal norms, especially where marriage (‘a male’s extension’) and motherhood (‘somebody’s mother’) are concerned.

While the writers themselves may support the emergence of a more individual African woman, they acknowledge too that the journey may be ‘lonely, difficult and often immensely sad’ (Frank,1987:17). This recalls the notion that the context for transformation is an imperfect one but that writers and critics press on for the rehabilitation of African women from an inferior position imposed on them by colonialism and tribalism. Adeola James quotes South African writer Bessie Head who explains poignantly: ‘...one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated men to a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of life’ (James,1990:4).

This study then does not, as confirmed earlier, focus on the feminist politics of power in the literary characterisation of women but rather on the total female experience of African women and the reappropriation of a more authentic portrayal of the identity of women in African literature. In introducing the second chapter of the dissertation as it investigates the portrayal of Amaka in Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough*, the words of Adeola James provide the impetus for the

celebration of a different literary representation of the African woman, now a protagonist in her own right: the voices of women in African literature must be heard as 'a moving and determining force' (1990:6).

NOTES

1. For the purpose of notation, an annotated Harvard method has been adopted. However, on occasion end notes have been deemed necessary.
2. Chikwenye Ogunyemi's definition is quoted in the *Canadian Journal Of African Studies* (Volume 22,1988:655) in an article titled 'The Social Vision of Zaynab Alkali' by Rotimi Johnson. Ogunyemi originally used the term in an article titled 'Women and Literature' which was published in *The Guardian* on 25 May 1985.
3. Katherine Frank in 'Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa' (1987) quotes Beatrice Stegeman, author of the article 'The Divorce Dilemma: The New Woman in Contemporary African Novels' (1974).

AMAKA

...she rediscovered herself.
She was amazed at what she was able to do and to accomplish.
Flora Nwapa

To many, Flora Nwapa is possibly best known as one of the first black African women to author a literary text in English. Born a member of Nigeria's Igbo community in 1931, Flora Nwapa is considered a pioneer among African women writers following the publication of *Efuru* in 1966. On account of its celebration of the 'strength, imagination, and energy of women who become economically and spiritually independent' (May and Lesniak, 1989:314), Nwapa's writing has steadfastly carved a path for women in African literature and female protagonists such as Amaka in *One is Enough* (1981).

Nwapa's novel *One is Enough* has been described as 'a female bildungsroman' (Stratton, 1994:86) because Amaka, like her predecessor Efuru in that eponymous novel, becomes 'a self assertive, self-authenticating woman' (86). But, as the argument will attempt to show, the novel may be read in a social-womanist mode. For Amaka, the journey of transformation is initiated by her failure to meet the expectations of her community. Although there are many references in the opening chapter of *One is Enough* to Amaka's intellectual astuteness ('Before the war, she had been a teacher' [4]) and to her business acumen ('My God, how many men can boast of wives presenting them with the raw cash to buy a Peugeot 504?' [16]), the first chapter of the novel also emphasises how inadequate Amaka

feels, especially since her marriage to Obiora, on account of her inability to bear children. As if the torment of Amaka's waking thoughts is not enough, Amaka is plagued during sleep by dreams of babies: 'She saw babies in her dreams. She was given both baby boys and girls in her dreams by unknown people. She took them, cleaned them and put them in babycoats to sleep' (4).

From the outset, the novel articulates unequivocally the stereotypical expectations that traditional Igbo society has of women. It is clear that nothing that Amaka can offer as an individual by way of her creative business endeavours or mental agility, as referred to a few lines earlier, can alleviate society's displeasure at her apparent inability to bear children. In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton highlights what is referred to in the Introduction to this study as the overwhelming 'weight of the structural, cultural and ideological processes' which bears upon women (Gordon, 1990:35) by recalling the contemptuous tones of the gossipmongers who torment women like Efurū and Amaka. To the gossipmongers of the novels' respective communities, Efurū and Amaka were 'men' since they 'could not reproduce' (Stratton,1994:95). This chapter of the dissertation attempts to illustrate how Flora Nwapa pays tribute to the resilience and innovativeness of women like Amaka who 'demonstrate the ability' to 'transform both motherhood *and* childlessness into positive, self-defined and powerful experiences' (May and Lesniak, 1989:314).

Fertility is the principal criterion, throughout the novel, by which Igbo society judges Flora Nwapa's heroine; and in *One is Enough*, Nwapa examines Amaka's personal development and overwhelming triumph despite her perceived failure in the eyes of her community. According to Florence Stratton, Nwapa's heroines run 'counter to literary stereotypes and societal norms of female development' (86). While Nwapa's heroines may fail to fulfil the immediate roles defined for them by members of Igbo society, they are portrayed nevertheless as industrious, prosperous, wealthy and often happy. Sabine Jell-Bahlsen confirms in her article 'The Concept of Mammywater in Flora Nwapa's Novels' (1995:34) that Nwapa's heroines have several characteristics in common: 'Each is an extraordinary, and, to some degree, non-conformist woman. Although generally abiding by the norms set by local custom, this woman also transcends the norms'.

Nwapa takes her counter-stereotypical portrayal of women one step further. In her first novel, *Efuru*, by weaving strands of Igbo myths into the narrative, Nwapa presents not only a woman who achieves fulfilment but one who does so in a culturally legitimate manner, giving rise to the claim for a womanist rather than merely a feminist thrust. The issue of cultural legitimacy for the female protagonists in African literature is a noteworthy one. Emancipation and self-determination for characters like Efuru and Amaka do not necessarily herald the severing of their ties to their African cultural heritage. Critics suggest that the possibility of achieving 'independence within the community' and 'not outside it' (Stratton, 1994:92) is important to Flora Nwapa who recognises the ambivalence which may accompany a woman's efforts to reach self-actualisation. Hence,

women's independence may be simultaneously 'sanctioned by one set of the community's traditions' (Uhamiri, the water goddess, for example, is symbolic of much that the heroines achieve, which is discussed more fully below) while 'it departs from another set of traditions' (92) (Amaka's decision that one husband is enough and that she will not marry again, for example).

To further the discussion on cultural legitimacy, it is appropriate to consider Nwapa's portrayal of Uhamiri, the water goddess who, although not prominent in the more recent *One is Enough*, is the powerful ruler of an ancient religion and 'celebrates a matriarchal heritage' (90) on behalf of all Igbo women. By weaving strands of the Uhamiri myth into her writing, especially in the novel *Efuru*, Nwapa achieves cultural legitimacy for her later female protagonists, such as Amaka. According to the Igbo myth, Uhamiri never experiences motherhood but this does not detract from her power and eminence in any way: 'For Uhamiri is not only beautiful and wealthy, she is also happy even though she has never experienced the joy of motherhood' (90). So, Nwapa's heroines 'make choices about their lives, taking what they can from both the traditional and modern cultures to try to forge a life for themselves and their communities' (Lindfors and Sander, 1993:182). The dichotomy encountered by women in colonial and post-colonial Africa was evident in the writer's own life. Jell-Bahlsen (1995:37) explains that

because of her high social standing, her high level of education, and her Church membership, Nwapa did not officially subscribe to the religious belief in the goddess. As a result, she excluded herself from certain parts of her own society, particularly from the religious beliefs of the Oru women who, even today, worship Uhamiri. However, despite her church membership, Nwapa

disassociated herself from the accusations and defamations made against the goddess and her worshipers by fanatic church members ... She herself loved not only her people but also their goddess.

For Amaka, the journey of transformation towards fulfilment and the acceptance without bitterness that she cannot bear children is a demanding one, especially when placed alongside the dreams she nurtured for herself as a young, unmarried woman: 'She was going to show everybody that a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she could love and cherish and children to crown the marriage' (1). As the narrative unfolds, every fragment of Amaka's original dream has to be replaced. Her marriage to Obiora, 'a man she could love and cherish', fails when she cannot 'crown' their union with offspring, and Amaka finds herself looking to a new life in Lagos, a considerable distance away from the home which she was never able to call fully her own in Onitsha.

Transformation, for Amaka, becomes critical when she realises that the dream she had once intended for herself will not materialise. In order to revise this dream, Amaka resolves to choose and create a new identity for herself in which she *can* find happiness. At the same time, if a full appreciation of the magnitude of Amaka's transformation is to be achieved by the reader, Amaka's former dream of being a wife and mother has to be closely examined and understood.

A consideration of Amaka's original identity and aspirations is relevant here because Amaka has to deal not only with the weight of her own disappointment

but also with the rejection of her community which is highlighted by her mother-in-law's previously mentioned caustic words: 'I shouted it from the rooftops. I told Obiora not to marry you, that you were going to be barren' (5). As mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation, it is at this point that Amaka realises that she must seek an alternative in which she can restore her true sense of self and dignity. Following this sobering episode, Amaka gradually distances herself from the 'conventional definitions of her gender' (Stratton,1994:91) and particularly the limiting expectations placed before women in relation to motherhood.

It must be reiterated at this point that this study does not seek to investigate the rejection of marriage and motherhood *per se* but rather it attempts to interrogate some of the expectations set up by society with respect to marriage and motherhood and the impact of this on women's identity. In order to do this, a reading of Victor Uchendu's *The Igbo of Southeast Nigeria* (1965) and Ifi Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), although two texts published more than twenty years apart, enables the reader to explore from different perspectives, the significance of marriage and motherhood among the traditional Igbo, and, by implication, among members of Amaka's community.

Uchendu's text is by definition a cultural anthropological study which offers readers of Nigerian literature (particularly that by writers of Igbo descent) 'insights into the richness and complexity of human life' (1965:vii) among the Igbo. In the foreword to Uchendu's text, editors George and Louise Spindler explain that the book is written 'by an Igbo about his own people' and that the

‘case study penetrates to the heart of the Igbo culture and social system’ (vii) and shows how ‘the Igbo have responded to contact with European culture’ (viii). From a more controversial standpoint, Ifi Amadiume studies ‘the politics of gender in Igbo society’ and challenges the idea that ‘all women in pre-colonial African societies were in a subordinate position’ (1987:blurb). Amadiume argues that roles in pre-colonial Africa were ‘not rigidly masculinised or feminised’ but that with the onset of the colonial period, patriarchal tendencies were ‘intensified’ (blurb). In addition, Amadiume warns readers of African literature that they should not rely on ‘outdated and racist projections’ established by colonial anthropology. Amadiume is further vociferous in her attack on certain western academics, to whom she refers as ‘Western female imperialists’ (1987:8), for misinterpreting ‘raw data’ from the Third World: ‘Such out of context and improper use of data undermines the internal contradictions and political struggles of women’ within Third World societies (9). Amadiume calls on Third World women to challenge the ‘new and growing patriarchal systems imposed on our societies through colonialism and western religious and educational influences’ and to expose ‘the contradictions in their societies’ (9). She concludes the preface to her text with the sobering sentiments that ‘militant feminism (feminism having been defined as a political consciousness by women), a constant reality for women in traditional Igbo societies, can be said to be a comparatively new phenomenon in the Western world and the monopoly of an elitist few’ (10). Angered by the apparent misunderstandings (mainly supported by the West and colonialists) surrounding the women of her own community and country, Amadiume says: ‘Nnobi women were not, and are still not tongue-tied’.

To illustrate the claim, she quotes a Nnobi proverb: ‘The mouth of women opens at random or pops like the pod of the oil-bean tree’ (69). What is valuable for the purposes of this dissertation is that both the afore-mentioned texts offer evidence of credible research and much insight into the significance of marriage and motherhood among the Igbo.

Uchendu explains that ‘Marriage is so important and central to the Igbo that nothing concerned with it is taken lightly’ (51). Uchendu and Amadiume both investigate the state of marriage in Igbo society and show clearly that colonisation by the British and the introduction of Christianity initiated considerable adjustments in this ancient rite of passage for the Igbo. According to Amadiume in her study of the politics of gender in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, the colonial period and Christianity heralded many changes for Igbo women. Amadiume shows that before the colonial invasion, marriage and motherhood ‘gave women honour’ since ‘wives as the initiates and custodians of the fertility cult reigned supreme’ (72). The importance of marriage was celebrated with songs and a palm-wine ceremony. Nwapa apparently agrees in *One is Enough* that the former balance of power and sacredness in marriage has changed largely because of the colonialists’ influence in Nigeria: ‘Times changed, and men began to assert their masculinity over their industrious wives’ (17). Uchendu explains further that marriage in earlier times was an important social rite as it proclaimed an alliance between two families and not the individuals alone. Such an amalgamation of families provides explication for the authority with which Obiora’s mother ‘interferes’ in his relationship with Amaka at the beginning of

the novel: 'Amaka was not sure what her offence was but her mother-in-law had been so rude to her the night before that she's been unable to sleep' (Nwapa,1981:1).

Despite Amaka's inability to satisfy, immediately, Igbo society's expectations of womanhood, at no point in the narrative does she allow herself to indulge in despair. Even before her marriage to Obiora, when, to all intents and purposes, it appeared that Amaka was 'going to be left on the shelf' (9), Amaka resolves that if she cannot find success through marriage, 'She would be in business, she would make money and her sisters, friends and age-grades would respect her' (10).

The end of Amaka's marriage to Obiora signals the beginning of her transformation to emotional and financial independence as one of Lagos's most influential 'cash madams' (78). It is through her industrious dealings in the 'attack trade' (4) during Nigeria's Civil War that Amaka rediscovers herself and is 'amazed at what she was able to do and to accomplish' (4). Amaka, like many other Nigerian women in the late 1960s, generates her own wealth and establishes her credibility as a businesswoman by buying goods from behind enemy lines and returning to sell these goods to members of her own community who need them in order to survive. Amadiume, though her tone may be interpreted as contemptuous when referring to 'Victorian puritan' (14), Mrs Leith-Ross, colonial adviser on women's education in Nigeria in the late 1930s, notes that even Leith-Ross could not ignore the economic zeal and innovativeness of Igbo

women when she described them as ‘this rare and invaluable force, thousands upon thousands of ambitious, go-ahead, courageous, self-reliant, hardworking, independent women’ (14). This tribute is tempered, however, as Amadiume points out, by stereotypical Victorian prudishness or narrowness: ‘the rich woman she aspires to be will be worth nothing if she is not also a virtuous woman...’ (14).

The Biafran War, fought primarily between the Igbo of the Eastern region and the rest of Nigeria (especially the Hausa tribal groups, and to a lesser extent, the Yoruba) in the late 1960s, reputedly denied the ordinary Igbo woman the luxury of ‘virtue’ as promoted, perhaps piously, by Leith-Ross thirty years earlier. In a civil war that has been described as ‘devastating’ by Gay Wilentz (Lindfors and Sander, 1993:182), women like Amaka were often compelled in their bid to survive to engage in the illegal ‘attack trade’ which was ‘clearly injurious to the economic health’ (182) of the region. The Biafran War is said to have changed irrevocably the lives of men and women and the social structure of the family as the Igbo knew it. When Nwapa was questioned by Wilentz of East Carolina University about ‘permitting’ her literary heroine to participate in questionable trade activities, Nwapa replied that Amaka should be left with ‘her own story’ (182) and that there ‘are many people who do this in our society. If the evils are relevant to the stories I am telling, I will include them’ (182). Nwapa does not adopt a moral stance - Amaka is allowed to unfurl the process of her transformation in a way that is credible and courageous, though, at times, legislatively ‘illegal’.

Nwapa illustrates how radical social changes this century have affected women in Igbo society. The inner conflict which Amaka experiences because of the clashing voices of her own culture's practices and that of the Christian missionary education she has received is apparent at the outset of the novel. While Amaka's own mother urges her 'to make men friends and start thinking of having children' (11), the missionary school teachers had spoken about the merits of chastity, marriage and home. Amaka's mother's response to the tenets of a Christian education is filled with scorn: 'You were being a good wife, chastity, faithfulness my foot' (32).

Thus European education imposed alien notions on the colonised peoples which resulted in the African being 'a misfit in his own community' (Kakembo,1944:7). This is a fairly common theme in the literature of Africa. Joyce Cary's novel *Mister Johnson* (1989), for example, provides a personal interpretation from a decidedly colonial perspective of this phenomenon. Cary's novel does to some extent capture the overturning of an indigenous social order but it can by no means be regarded as an authentic portrayal of the African identity in the face of a fierce colonisation strategy. Cary disposes of the poignant Mister Johnson in a chillingly convenient manner so that 'order' can be restored to its former state of oppositional Manichean dynamics in which, says critic Abdul JanMohamed (1983:3), the world is governed by a system of white/black and good/evil. In his touchstone text, *Manichean Aesthetics* (1983), JanMohamed shows how African writers and the individuals they portray in their novels are faced with a dilemma.

If they adhere 'to the values of' their 'own culture', they may 'choose to belong to a petrified society' but if they choose to accept the culture of the West, they reject their 'own past and culture' (151). Cary's portrayal of Mister Johnson robs the African individual of dignity and sets him up for ridicule. Particularly through the use of language where, for example, Johnson speaks of England as 'Oh, England, my home all on de big water' (1989:41), Cary reveals his true antipathy towards the African. However, African writers like Nwapa and Achebe resurrect and, as Achebe says, 'reclaim the dignity of the past' (JanMohamed,1983:155) by paying tribute to the individuals who are either sacrificed during or who survive prolonged periods of cultural confusion and dispossession.

It is suggested that in Nwapa's novel, the clash between the African and colonial worldviews is partly responsible for Amaka's reluctance to accept that her husband Obiora has formalised his relationship with another woman because she has borne him two sons. Amaka cannot bring herself to 'marry a wife for her husband now that it was confirmed that she was barren' because of 'the changes and pattern of life' (17) in Igbo society. While polygyny is an integral part of traditional Igbo marriage practice, women like Amaka wrestle with tradition because of values introduced by the West. Uchendu explains that western values concerning marriage, for example, were first entertained by individuals among the Igbo only at the beginning of the century and that the 'Igbo, therefore, remained remarkably free from external influence until this century when the missionaries established their headquarters at Onitsha' (1965:36). Uchendu states further that the Igbo largely resisted British rule but were forced to capitulate after Long Juju

of Arochukwu which had 'acted as the political and religious headquarters of the Igbo' (38) was finally destroyed. Marriage among the Igbo is what Uchendu describes as a 'normal condition for both men and women; polygyny a symbol of high status, is the ideal. However the great majority of Igbo marriages are monogamous, reflecting, on the one hand, the force of economic circumstances and, on the other, the tendency of the literate professional and white collar class to acquire modern status symbols' such as cars and 'to conform to the norms of their Christian faith' (49). Uchendu interestingly, if somewhat cynically, suggests that 'cars are replacing plural wives as status symbols' (49).

The idea that it is possible for a wife to be perceived as a commodity in some way may be highlighted by the customary payment of the bride price which is a critical aspect of all traditionally observant Igbo marriages and to which Amaka pays great attention.

In a recent and interesting article in a column titled 'One Small Male Voice' (*Femina*, August 1999), Babusi Sibanda investigates, in an accessible manner, customary practices such as polygyny and the payment of the bride price, known as 'lobola' in South Africa. On a satirical note, Sibanda suggests that such practices are not 'Y2K compliant' and he labels them as 'baggage' that is best discarded in the twentieth century. Sibanda says

Lobola may differ slightly from one part of Africa to another. The ritual may be more elaborate in some parts and the negotiators may consist of different sets of people. Ultimately, though, lobola is the negotiation among men about the price at which the bride will change hands. 'Bride price' defines it exactly (12).

Further on in the article, Sibanda explains that ‘women who haven’t had lobola paid for them are stigmatised...’: This is particularly relevant for Adah, the heroine of *Second-class Citizen* by Buchi Emecheta and the character under discussion in the next chapter of this dissertation. Sibanda concludes that, in his opinion, polygyny and lobola are ‘male privileges’ and that while he is ‘proud’ of his African heritage, he believes that making changes to what he terms ‘oppressive practices’ will not make Africans ‘less African’ (12).

Amaka’s repayment of the bride-price to Obiora is most significant to her as it symbolises her new independence in several respects. By returning the sum of money which Obiora had forwarded in order to ‘purchase’ his bride from her family, Amaka no longer ‘belongs’ to him. Hence, it would appear that transformation for Amaka occurs largely through financial emancipation. This important facet of Amaka’s transformation and new-found identity through economic empowerment is discussed again later in the chapter.

By placing the responsibility and dilemma of the acceptance of Obiora’s second marriage upon Amaka, Nwapa, according to Stratton, ‘provides a critique both of colonialism and of Igbo patriarchy through her depiction of forces that inhibit female development’ (Stratton:107). Although Obiora makes it clear that his second wife, whom he has married secretly, has greater status in the household on account of her fertility, he does not force Amaka to leave the marriage. His scathing accusations, however, deny Amaka a dignified place in the home: ‘You forget that you are childless. You would not raise your voice in this house if you

were sensible' (19). While Amaka recoils from the crushing blow of her husband's warning to 'brace yourself for a hard time. If you are sensible, you will stay here under my protection' (19), Obiora is perplexed by his first wife's decision to abandon a 'respectable' marriage. Likewise, Adaobi's husband, Mike, articulates similar sentiments when he attempts to deal with his own fears concerning Amaka's influence over 'his' Adaobi: 'Is she going back to her husband? It is better for her reputation' (60).

Amaka rails against Obiora and the patriarchal values he represents by not doing what is deemed conventionally sensible and she realises that perhaps 'there was no such man' (23) as the one who had existed in her girlhood dreams. At this point in the narrative, Amaka sets herself apart from most other Igbo women and steps decisively into the process that will finally afford her the 'recognition of her identity and role in the world' which, referring once again to Abrams in *A Glossary Of Literary Terms* (1971:113), is one of the defining characteristics of the self-actualised individual in a bildungsroman. Realising that a woman is considered 'nothing because she was unmarried or barren' (22), Amaka chooses to forge a new life for herself: 'She would leave and set up house somewhere. She would live a single and respected life... She would find fulfilment, she would find pleasure, even happiness in being a single woman' (24). (This quote once again draws the reader's attention to the polarities set up by society's expectations of women's obeisance and Amaka's determination to liberate herself from such constraints. Amaka's resolute repetition of the word 'would' when referring to her intention to establish a life that may be considered unorthodox but is

nevertheless fulfilling is reminiscent of the dichotomies evoked by JanMohamed's Manichean principles referred to earlier.)

It is within the context of an expanding urban landscape that Amaka finds the opportunity to build a new life and to advance economically. The icon of the prosperous African woman in a post-colonial metropolis recurs in the literature of both African men and women, although the treatment which these powerful icons receive at the hands of African writers differs. Black neo-colonial rule in many instances appears to replace white domination, and women like Amaka and Ngugi wa' Thiongo's Wanja in *Petals of Blood* (1977) adapt to the corruption of post-independence Africa in order to ensure their own individual survival and later, prosperity. The social order of Amaka and Wanja's communities is severely fractured by colonial subjugation and the disillusionment which followed what Ama Ata Aidoo names 'a dance of the masquerades called Independence' in her novel *Sister Killjoy* (1988:95). In addition, events, such as the Biafran Civil War in Nigeria (already mentioned), changed the structure of family life to the extent that previous taboos were overturned in the struggle for survival. Nwapa shows that women's roles and behaviour changed since 'The war destroyed family life as the girls knew it' (58) and women like Amaka soon earned the stereotypical reputation of having 'a way of getting to men in high positions' (57). It is Wanja in *Petals of Blood* who most vividly defines the cannibalistic rules of play in neo-colonial Africa: 'this Africa knows only one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten' (291).

Given this 'law of the jungle' situation, Amaka predictably does not resist the corruption she encounters in Lagos. Ironically, Adaobi's husband, Mike, 'a civil servant' who has been 'trained by the colonial masters' (61) is alarmed at the ease with which Amaka glides through a system in which 'Bribery and corruption' are 'the order of the day' (61). It is through the character of Mike that the reader learns more about the decay in post-independence African communities. Mike resists the corruption around him and yet, for all his observing of a moral code, he receives no monetary reward, and he and Adaobi struggle valiantly to improve their financial circumstances. Adaobi soon realises that she and Mike had been 'living in a fool's paradise' (63) and that the crooked system would never reward her family although she and her husband had always been 'dutiful' (63).

Stratton suggests that 'through urban migration' (1994:103), women achieve empowerment and economic advancement. In contrast to Adaobi, on arrival in Lagos, Amaka breaks with the more conventional morality expressed above and immediately experiences a number of 'lucky' encounters in which she registers her company easily and so decides that 'Lagos was good for her, Lagos was kind to her' and that she had come to Lagos 'to look for her identity, to start all over again' (45). Amaka concludes at the end of chapter five that she is going to take heed of her mother's advice: 'For the first time she was going to put into practice what her mother had been teaching her. She was not going to wait, she was going for the kill' (54). This decision on Amaka's part signposts a change in the heroine's feelings about herself. The tone and authority with which Amaka begins

her new life are therefore presented as very different from the voice of the young woman who pleads with her mother-in-law in Chapter One of the novel: ‘You have known my plight. It’s not my fault...’ (3). Amaka leaves behind the conditional life of Onitsha which she describes as ‘the place where’ she has ‘suffered most’ (53). Amaka does return to visit Onitsha but on her own terms and only when she has achieved financial freedom and recognition within a highly competitive urban context.

In *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi sketches an even more flamboyant and fiery heroine in Wanja, who is described as a ‘bird periodically born out of the ashes and dust’ (1977:281) and who, like Amaka, makes a pact with herself: ‘She would have a completely new beginning in Ilmorog. Since she had left Ilmorog she had two humiliating and shameful experiences. She would break with the past and make something of herself in Ilmorog’ (107). Phoenix-like, Wanja returns to the fictional town of Ilmorog to restore her identity while Amaka leaves Onitsha to rebuild hers in real-life Lagos. By looking at the ultimate fates of female characters such as Amaka (in West Africa) and Wanja (in East Africa), the reader witnesses how the creative transformation of women in African literature is either given permission to occur or is perhaps denied its fullest expression by the writers themselves.

Hence, Wanja ‘is the most powerful woman in all Ilmorog. She owns houses between here and Nairobi. She owns a fleet of matatas. She owns a fleet of big transport lorries’ (281). The acquisition of such powerful status symbols

demands a high price which both Wanja and Amaka, in her turn, pay consciously. In Nwapa's Lagos, 'No man can do anything for a woman, even if the woman is the head of a state, without asking her for her most precious possession - herself' (68). Echoing a similar theme, Abdullah in *Petals of Blood* feels somehow 'personally humiliated by what seemed' to be Wanja's 'irrevocable and final entry into whoredom. It hurt him, but he understood' (311). The tone in which writers discuss this 'final entry' into a life far removed from that which is considered respectable by society reveals the true status of women like Amaka in the eyes of the writers. When Ngugi describes Wanja's financial success, it is ominously tinged and must ultimately be purged by fire: '...her head was bowed slightly and it was as if, under the bluish light of her creation, the wealth she had accumulated weighed on her heavily, as if the jewelled, rubied cord around her neck was now pulling her and her very shadow to the ground' (295). For Ngugi, Wanja's economic empowerment is achieved by dubious means and so, at the end of the novel, redemption is called for. The novel's final images of Wanja liken her to the biblical Jezebel and her home is destroyed by fire: 'He stood on the hill and watched the whorehouse burn, the tongues of flame from the four corners forming petals of blood' (333). Wanja is allowed to survive but only after she has been metaphorically 'baptised by fire' (337).

Nwapa's heroine, Amaka, is portrayed unequivocally as a woman who has survived and triumphed despite the odds and her method of survival is not questioned or judged by Nwapa, only by members of her own community:

‘That was the thinking of people at home. Any woman who was unmarried and lived in Lagos was a common harlot’ (83). Ironically though, the very people who condemn Amaka also approach her for financial assistance, revealing that the collective Igbo conscience is fraught with contradictions: ‘She had been condemned by her own community. The same community would go to her for financial help if she had made it, claiming that they were close relations’.

In their respective narratives, both Amaka and Wanja elect never to return to their previous states of innocence in which they were part of what Wanja calls ‘the herd of victims’ (294). It is ironic that marriage, often touted as the fulfilment of many of a community’s social expectations, robs women like Amaka of self-respect and integrity while the conscious trading of favours in an honest albeit mercenary exchange does not. Adaobi looks upon her friend’s financial achievements in Lagos with awe: ‘To Adaobi, Amaka’s story sounded like a fairy tale. In under a year, she had accomplished so much, and she and her husband had been in Lagos for years and they did not have a plot of land they called their own’ (68). Amaka reveals candidly that her liaison with the Alhajji means that when she wants a telephone, she can have it installed in under a week although she does not ‘even know how much it cost’ (68).

Amaka’s means to financial autonomy in Lagos is viewed dubiously by a number of the novel’s characters and the reader too may interpret Nwapa’s portrayal of the political nature of the relationship between men and women as somewhat cynical. However, it is the character of Izu, also known as Father Mclaid, the

Catholic priest, who reveals Nwapa's true sentiments about and faith in the possibility of an honest and mature interdependence between men and women. The man whom Nwapa selects to finally father Amaka's children is portrayed as deeply caring and intelligent: 'He had loved her with a great passion which was mature and considerate' (101). At first, Amaka views Izu as just another man who can help her establish 'a base where she would gain contract jobs, make money and live an independent life. Her' initially mercenary 'association with the priest was not motivated by any feeling of affection, least of all love, at the beginning' (101). By choosing an individual of Izu's calibre (several years earlier, someone had prophesied that Amaka 'was going to be pregnant and the person responsible was going to be a special person' [101]) to walk alongside Amaka as she experiences transformation and fulfilment, Nwapa demonstrates clearly that she *does* believe in the possibility of successful gender interdependence. For Nwapa, however, the relationship does not need to conform to society's predetermined stereotypes of male/female relations. On the contrary, Nwapa suggests that marriage by its very nature and as it is upheld by society in the novel often cannot lead to self-realisation for women. Amaka's mother and aunt echo this theme at various points in the novel: 'A marriage can make and unmake one. I learnt a lot from my own mother and I am putting into practice what she taught me' (9). In like manner to Li's grandmother in *The Stillborn* (the study of Chapter Four) and reflecting Clarissa Pinkola Estes's notion of the wisdom of the 'Baba Yaga' (also discussed in Chapter Four), it is Amaka's mother who stresses the value of interdependence but explains that a sense of belonging and identity can be achieved in several ways and not necessarily only through marriage: 'You



cannot be alone in the e, relations, blood relations to go through life' (85). Indeed, it is the sage advice of Amaka's mother that protects the daughter when she returns to Onitsha as a wealthy and independent woman and it is this same 'Baba Yaga' figure of the wise old woman, who finally says in one of the novel's most memorable passages 'That's better. Goodbye to husbands, not goodbye to men. They are two different things' (85).

Nwapa offers, through Amaka, several possibilities for relationships between men and women that need not deny women self-realisation. Amaka crystallises her thoughts about her relationship with men and in particular, Izu: 'She neither wanted to be a wife any more, nor be a mistress, or even a kept woman. She wanted a man, just a man and she wanted to be independent of this man, pure and simple' (100). So, Amaka rejects her liaison with the Alhajji because it restricts her from developing further and frustrates her new-found emotional independence: 'He did not want her temporarily, he wanted her for ever. He wanted to own her, to keep her' (100). In addition, it is clear that the nature of the relationship between Amaka and the Alhajji is not affectionate but rather expedient. In the context of her relations with the Alhajji, Amaka perceives herself as a commodity, a chattel.

Nwapa's novel, by virtue of the manner in which it unfolds, provides readers with the message that transformation or the creation of a new identity for women is possible but that the road to such a destination is signposted by a schism from that which is considered traditionally sound and respectable. A number of Igbo and

Christian taboos are, of necessity, challenged by Nwapa and, so, Nwapa's heroine is able to find fulfilment in an environment which is plagued by the ills of neo-colonialism and modernisation. Amaka is shown to achieve transformation by contravening long-held social norms. She establishes a sexual relationship with Izu, a Catholic priest sworn to celibacy (Adaobi echoes society's horror of such a transgression when she exclaims: 'You, how could you tempt a man of God?...Oh, I am so disappointed in you' [132]), who then fathers Amaka's twins despite earlier indications of barrenness. Finally, the novel's denouement is reached when Amaka, although not unwilling to compromise a priest's position, is determined to remain a single parent without the social protection of the umbrella of marriage.

Reviewing once more Uchendu's claim that an Igbo woman's 'great objective in life is marriage; that a woman's glory is her children, and that to have children she must have a husband' and 'That this is a chance she cannot afford to miss' (1965:53), the reader grasps easily the strides Amaka makes in developing her own personally endorsed system of values. While Amaka does decide that 'one marriage is enough', she acknowledges fully the part that Izu plays in transforming her life: '...I shall forever remain grateful to him for proving to the world that I am a mother as well as a woman' (154).

Izu fulfils societal expectations by showing the world that Amaka is a 'true' African woman, a mother, by fathering for her not a single child but twins. The fact that after anguished years of apparent barrenness, Amaka gives birth to twins,

invites the reader to contemplate a number of compelling but enigmatic questions. On the one hand, the birth of twins in the novel could symbolise a complete breaking of Igbo taboos or, on the other, this could suggest that when circumstances are optimal following the exercising of personal choice, one's expectations of life have every chance of being abundantly met. It is important to remember that in Igbo mythology, twins are regarded as a crime against the earth and, in line with Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), these offspring would ordinarily be abandoned or left in the evil forest to die.

The notion that giving birth to twins is considered shameful in traditional Igbo society is touched upon in Nwapa's novel. Uchendu elaborates in a paragraph titled *Igbo Ideas about Conception* that for 'a woman to bear more than one child at a time was regarded as degrading humanity to the level of beasts' and that some Igbo uphold the belief that 'Plural offspring is nature's law for goats, cats and dogs, not for men' (1965:58). Yet, for Amaka, the arrival of twins is depicted as a moment of triumph: 'Mama Amaka must be a happy woman having such wonderful and lucky children. All her children have made it. Amaka, whom everyone thought was going to end up childless and husbandless, now has two children, two boys at a go' (114). But behind Amaka's moment of victory and the most powerful symbol of the fulfilment of her deepest yearnings is the somewhat uncomfortable reminder that she has broken away from the dictates of certain cultural customs: 'In the olden days, she would not have set eyes on the twins. They would have been killed and the gods and goddesses appeased' (114). Some may conclude that the victory is a Pyrrhic one for Amaka yet it is a clear signal

that she is no longer a victim of a common syndrome. Amaka has creatively transformed her identity and status to achieve a personally endorsed niche in the world.

Nwapa's heroine begins her journey from a position where the society in which she lives 'attaches much importance to fertility in a woman, and because it is a patrilineal society, male issue is absolutely necessary if the line of succession is to continue' (Taiwo,1967:21). Further, to quote Taiwo again, in Amaka's community, 'A woman who has no issue is considered to be in a state of permanent disgrace and is jeered at by all her neighbours' (21). Amaka, however, reaches the empowered position where she finally resolves that having been granted her wish to experience motherhood, she cannot abide the prospect of a second marriage. Amaka tussles with the notion of marriage to Izu when he declares that he wants to be recognised as the father of the twins. But, for Amaka, marriage is anathema. She paints an image in which all that she has personally achieved and struggled for in Lagos is ominously threatened by the prospect of conventional marriage: 'I don't want to be a wife anymore, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. There is something in that word that does not suit me. As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself' (127). This extract serves to illustrate the subtle distinction between a feminist and womanist perspective.

In *One is Enough*, Amaka achieves self-realisation when she consciously chooses to turn her back on the so-called 'respectable' structures of conventional society.

Transformation is fully accomplished by avoiding dependence on a marriage and husband and by striving towards financial emancipation and personal empowerment, through the use of and not the rejection of male collaboration. But, for Amaka, marriage, even to Izu, represents personal impotence akin to incarceration. She is, therefore, and not without some irony, relieved when he decides independently to remain a man of the church: 'Father McLaid has gone back to the church' (154). Nwapa underlines Amaka's point of view when the character likens marriage to a life of bondage: 'As a wife, I am almost impotent. I am in a prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me' (127).

Thus, through this novel, the reader is compelled to consider closely many of the dichotomies confronting women like Amaka in Africa. Amaka is triumphant despite decades of cultural displacement and tension. Her migration to Lagos, while representing a geographical departure from the less developed and more traditional setting of Onitsha, is accompanied by the 'evils' that unexpectedly (especially for those who had been colonised and anticipated eagerly the advent of independence) mark neo-colonialism including corruption, exploitation and prostitution. Amaka's journey both literally and metaphorically is beset by dilemma and contradiction but she finally triumphs, ensconced within a new-found order. Lagos, an urban centre, which facilitates the overturning of traditional systems, is not presented by Nwapa as ideal, and though the reader may be tempted towards some moralising, Nwapa's text, like that of Emecheta, discussed in the following chapter, asserts clearly that transformation for women

as self-authenticating individuals, despite the continued prevalence of less than perfect contexts, must not be delayed.

ADAH

Be as cunning as a serpent but harmless as a dove.
Buchi Emecheta

While many readers and critics recognise Flora Nwapa as the first Nigerian woman to publish a literary text in English, it is on Buchi Emecheta that they bestow the honour of ‘Nigeria’s best known female writer’¹ despite Emecheta’s decision to live permanently in England since 1962. Buchi Emecheta’s second novel *Second-class Citizen*, first published in 1975, presents the reader with the opportunity to examine a number of the important issues associated with and explored in the writing of African women. For Emecheta, particularly, it seems that the literary text dramatises not only ‘the problems African women encounter in a traditional male-oriented society’ but that much of her writing is also a thinly-veiled fictitious account ‘bearing the mark of painful authenticity’ and providing Emecheta with an outlet for the ‘rage’ she felt ‘at a society and a man who could not accept her independent spirit’.²

By using the eclectic theoretical approach (womanist, social realist) described in the Introduction to this study, this chapter is able to concentrate imaginatively on the multiple oppressions identified and experienced by African women. Set in Nigeria and England in the 1960s and 70s, the novel reveals what it is to be a woman of Igbo cultural descent, and by implication, according to Emecheta, to be

a victim of a syndrome that is identified as ‘second-class citizenship’. Emecheta’s heroine, Adah, explores the means by which a woman, and more specifically an African woman in both a traditional African and urban Western context, may achieve transformation and greater fulfilment. Emecheta casts into keen and uncompromising focus what John Updike (Draper,1982:707) delineates as ‘the situation of women in a society where their role, though crucial, was firmly subordinate and where the forces of potential liberation have arrived with bewildering speed’.

In the opening chapter of *Second-class Citizen*, a vivid description is painted of the women of Ibuza, a village in Nigeria, as they straighten their curly hair and don cotton blouses in anticipation of the coming of their ‘Messiah’, Lawyer Nweze (1994:2). There is a homogeneity in their preparatory activities that is captured sharply in Emecheta’s imagery: ‘The women bought identical cotton material from the UAC department store and had it made into lappas and blouses of the same style’ (2). A little further on details of the women’s ‘uniform’ include that ‘it had a dark velvety background with pale blue drawings of feathers on it’ while ‘the headscarf was red’ (10). The contrast between the solidarity presented in such colourful cameos and Emecheta’s gradual but steady identification of these women as second-class citizens or victims of a common syndrome is powerfully ironic. While the women may depend on their collective persona for a sense of protection or identity, it is this very sense of oneness which Emecheta suggests traps them too. The women are portrayed as being ‘happy in their innocence, just like children. Their wants were simply and easily met’ (9). A

warning follows, however, and their child-like lack of awareness is later likened to an opiate-induced state of consciousness on which they become hooked. Some readings of Emecheta's novel, such as Katherine Frank's essay 'The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta' (1982), have been labelled as too militant in their feminism on account of claims that Emecheta shows that 'the oppression of women is an invariable constant' (Draper,1992:709). Abioseh Michael Porter, in his 1988 interpretation of the novel, suggests quite rightly that *Second-class Citizen* should not be relegated exclusively within 'the feminist protest tradition' but that it should also be viewed through the lens of the 'novel of personal development' 'dealing with a young African woman's gradual acquisition of knowledge about herself ...and about the themes of love and marriage' (Draper,1982:175). It is such a reading that this chapter of the dissertation attempts to achieve. In other words, *Second-class Citizen*, like *One is Enough*, can accurately be classed as what Stratton (1994:86) called 'a female bildungsroman' (quoted at the beginning of Chapter Two of this study).

The women of Ibuza are united in a number of ways but it is their naive response to the post-independence figure of Lawyer Nweze that first characterises their small town slumber. Lawyer Nweze is described as 'a Messiah specially created for the Ibuza people' and his prospective arrival in the town is greeted with a flurry of activity and song including the 'weaving' (2) of the lawyer's name into a series of lyrics. It is not long, however, before Nweze is seen to be the

stereotypical corrupt neo-colonial official who just ‘stayed in the north making barrels and barrels of money’ (22).

Emecheta skilfully and swiftly introduces most of the concerns of the African woman writer in the first chapter of her novel. In order to appreciate more closely the extent of the transformation of Emecheta’s heroine, Adah Obi, an approach other than only a Western feminist one is once again most valuable in the study of this literary character and text. Here the choice of family name is a crucial key to a fuller reading of the text. The Igbo name for ‘king’ is ‘Obi’ and it is translated literally as the ‘centre’. The word reflects the corrective, facilitating role of the democratic Igbo monarch. Like Obierika in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), the king’s task is to arbitrate, to act as a fulcrum in restoring balance when ‘the centre cannot hold’ and ‘mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’ (the proem to Achebe’s novel is taken from the poem ‘The Second Coming’ by W B Yeats).

In her consideration of Emecheta’s novels, American critic Katherine Fishburn (who had previously been criticised by Florence Stratton for her ‘problematic’ reading of Emecheta’s novels³), recognises the need for a point of understanding if a ‘cross-cultural conversation’ or reading is to be possible: ‘Even some of our most obvious points of historical convergence, such as the slave trade and colonialism, are events that would have been experienced far differently by the Africans and Western slavers and colonisers – and thus left different marks in the respective traditions involved’ (Fishburn, 1995:10).

The effects of white imperialism on the previously colonised Nigerian people cannot be ignored, and neither can the patriarchal tendencies of Igbo society, especially after colonisation, be overlooked. A quote from Emecheta's novel *The Joys of Motherhood* (1988) reveals that Emecheta, like many other African writers and critics (including Ifi Amadiume, referred to in the previous chapter of this dissertation), supports the claim that colonisation, contrary to popular western belief, exacerbated and encouraged rather than alleviated the subjugation of women: 'To regard a woman who is quiet and timid as desirable was something that came after Agbadi's time, with Christianity...' (10). Adah, portrayed in the novel as intelligent and educated, has to move through and beyond the parameters of both colonialism and patriarchy if she is to re-create an identity in which she can find personal meaning and an escape from second-class citizenship, if such a transition is completely possible.

In striking contrast to the collective pose and mood of the Ibuza women, Adah is alone in her aspirations when she dreams quietly of freedom through education. The unfolding of the novel reveals that 'most dreams, as all dreamers know quite well, do have setbacks. Adah's dream was no exception, for hers had many' (12). In a thematically similar manner, Zaynab Alkali, author of *The Stillborn* (1988), also uses the analogy of the African woman protagonist in the quest motif as a dreamer who experiences the fruition of some, but not necessarily all of her dreams. The title of Alkali's novel which is considered more closely in the following chapter of this study refers directly to the phenomenon that some dreams are simply 'stillborn' (1988:104). That is, while the dreams themselves

are nurtured or cherished, they are never fully realised. Emecheta's novel begins with the opening line 'It had all begun like a dream. You know, that sort of dream which seems to have originated from nowhere, yet one was always aware of its existence' (1).

Adah's dream, which stirs vaguely at first, becomes the 'reality' and the 'Presence' (1) which is largely the catalyst for the process of her transformation. While Adah is not even certain of 'what gave birth to her dream', she is only 'eight years old when she was being directed' (1) by it. 'As a novel of personal development' or a female bildungsroman, therefore, Abioseh Michael Porter (1988:716) concedes that *Second-class Citizen* is 'quite successful in the depiction of Adah's growth from the initial stage of naivete and ignorance to her final stage of self-realisation and independence'.

Feminist Carol Boyce-Davies highlights, on behalf of black women, as does the earlier-mentioned Toni Morrison, the complexity of the question of identity in her book *Black Women, Writing and Identity* (1994:8): 'One still finds some women trying to say that they want to speak only as an African or as a 'black', and not as a woman, as if it were possible to divest oneself of one's gender and stand neutered'. A purely western feminist reading of *Second-class Citizen* would similarly deny one a genuine understanding of the African woman's context. Katherine Fishburn (1995:10) agrees that those, 'whose critical faculties have been shaped to a lesser or greater degree by the European novel, are generally ill-prepared to understand - or even to recognise - the true context of African

fiction'. Furthering discussion on this particular issue, Boyce-Davies says women, like Adah, who become aware of the condition of their existence, begin to imagine alternatives and strive to actualise them (15). A western feminist may urge Adah to leave her 'useless slob of a Nigerian student husband' (Fishburn,1995:63), but it is the African woman who understands fully the implications of a failed marriage in Igbo society. And so, Adah, in the contemplation of the re-creation of her identity, continues to yearn for freedom through scholarship (the theme of education will be considered briefly later in this chapter), an ambition once described as 'too big for a girl like her to express' (18).

It is worth pausing to consider momentarily what may be perceived as the ironic role of women as a collective influence on the recreation of an individual woman's identity. When Adah hopes to transform her identity, she feels that she is impeded by her more traditionally orientated mother and claims that her mother's psychological 'nagging' (6) is far more intimidating than her father's physical caning. It appears that the continued suppression of women is, to some extent, unwittingly perpetuated by other women. Adah explains that the women in her immediate environment had a way of 'sapping her self-confidence'(6) and her portrayal of these women is at times bluntly unflattering in its suggestions of indolence: 'Women were like that. They sat in the house, ate, gossiped and slept' (7).

One may find Emecheta's portrayal of the Ibuza women problematic in terms of what the feminist or rather womanist text strives to achieve, and yet, while women may be objectified by a system of patriarchal values, it *does* seem that Adah's transformation is to some degree delayed by other women. Buchi Emecheta articulates her thoughts about this lack of a deeper rather than a superficial solidarity among women in an interview with Adeola James in London in 1986. Echoing what Adah experiences in the novel, Emecheta claims that 'half of the problem rests with the women. They are so busy bitching about one another...the usual reaction is, "So she has written a book? I know who did it for her".' (James,1990:44). By withholding their support from the transformative pioneers among themselves, women preserve an identity which is subjugated and oppressed. When Adah endures domestic difficulties, the women in her community are relieved that she cannot escape hardship though she chooses a different route from theirs: 'Did she not make her own bed? Well, let her sleep in it! ... We thought she was the educated lady who knew all the answers' (167).

In contrast to Emecheta's claims, Adijah, another woman interviewed by Tuula Gordon in *Feminist Mothers* (1990), portrays her perceptions of and interaction with women quite differently. Adijah speaks of the significance of her mother's experiences in constructing her own (Adijah's) life and politics: 'I have always drawn from my mother's experience and family and friends ... because my mother was always a strong woman ... and has always taught me to be like that' (1990:141).

In her autobiographical work *Head Above Water* (1986:4), Emecheta explores the life-long effects of her relationship with her own mother, Alice Ogbanje Emecheta: ‘She never understood the short, silent, mystery daughter she had I could hear that loud laugh and her voice saying as she used to tell me so many times when I was a little girl: “You think too much for a woman.” Emecheta describes the realisation in adulthood that her mother had succumbed to the ‘untalked of’ agonies of being a woman and ‘doubly culturally enslaved’. If Emecheta’s heroine, Adah, is to pursue an alternative identity and escape the fate that has become a collective common-victim syndrome for so many Igbo women, she needs to rely more on an inner resourcefulness than on any outer circumstances or influences.

Adah recognises immediately that transformation is accompanied by struggle. Her family and community recognise too that she will not succumb easily to parameters imposed on her gender, race and class. Adah’s father-in-law tells Francis, her new husband: ‘She has makings of a woman who would think before she acts. Very few women can do that, I tell you’ (25). Ironically, it is this very capacity for independence that partly leads to the unravelling of Francis and Adah’s marriage later in the novel. In her article titled ‘Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta’ (1989:9), Helen Chukwuma describes protagonists like Adah as women who ‘excel in their roles, they are forceful and articulate, thinking beings whom the reader is brought to recognise and appreciate as individuals not types. Each character brings to bear on a stifling situation her

own peculiar way of solving the problem, hence we appreciate them for what they are and have become and not so much what they are supposed to be’.

Emecheta illustrates how women, like Adah, who are trapped into a particular set of circumstances may be ‘forced’ to use their intellectual independence ‘resourcefully’ in their bid to experience personal choice and self determination. Although Lady Macbeth and Adah are not only centuries but literary traditions apart, one particular image (‘Be as cunning as a serpent but harmless as a dove’ [24]) in the second chapter of the novel carries strong echoes of Shakespeare’s tragic heroine’s words (‘look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t’) in Act I scene v, although Adah’s tone is not by any means menacing. (In fact, Abioseh Michael Porter says that the obvious ‘naivete, immaturity and ignorance’ [1988:715] displayed by Adah at times is frequently characteristic of the protagonists in the early parts of the novel of personal development.)

When Adah realises that ‘illiterate parents, who thought they knew a great deal of a curious kind of philosophy’ (24), force their children into marriages of convenience, she resigns herself to the proem’s credo and the proverb ‘Be as cunning as a serpent but harmless as a dove’ (24). (With respect to Adah’s use of proverbs, Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) highlights the Igbo tradition of the proverb as a most sophisticated aspect of the ‘art of conversation’ and indeed proverbs are seen to be ‘the palm-oil with which words are eaten’ [5].) Emecheta may be suggesting through Adah that the guile stereotypically bestowed on women is, in fact, a device resorted to to ensure personal survival.

Although, unlike Amaka in *One is Enough* (discussed in the previous chapter), Adah marries Francis with the comfort that at least ‘she could go on studying at her own pace’ (19), she soon acknowledges that she and Francis are ‘puppets’ and ‘that they bow down to their elders’ (23).

Throughout the novel, Adah questions the values of her community. This questioning stance in itself may lead Adah to transformation and yet her intellectual confidence does not preclude her from emotional conflict and pain. Although she anticipates fully the cost of her freedom and self-determination, when she resolves not to be a victim of a common syndrome, she finds herself ‘alone once more, forced into a situation dictated by society in which, as an individual, she had little choice’ (23). In this sense, it can be argued that her creative transformation is more clearly moderated by the dictates of a restrictive social milieu than that of Amaka who, as shown in Chapter Two of this study, is able to loosen those bonds in a more radical way, especially with regard to the birth of her twin sons and to her rejection of marriage to their father.

Marriage provides an appropriate point of departure for a consideration of Adah’s journey towards the reconstruction of her identity. Helen Chukwuma supports this idea when she claims that in Emecheta’s novels, ‘the true test of the woman continues to be the marriage institution. The marriage paradox lies in the fact that it is both sublimating and subsuming. Through it a woman attains a status acclaimed by society and fulfils her biological need of procreation and companionship’ (1989:5).

Marriage in *Second-class Citizen* should, however, not be measured against the tradition of the Western ‘love story’ if its role within Igbo society and Adah’s life is to be fully understood. A more authentic interpretation of the novel in terms of its author writing from within an African cultural milieu discloses that cultural perceptions of love and marriage are markedly varied. Katherine Fishburn suggests that the differences are largely ‘to do with how we express feelings of love’ (65), while Joseph Okpaku in *Culture and Criticism: African Critical Standards for African Literature* (1970:20) discusses a notable contrast in African and Western conventions. Okpaku explains that love in the African context is ‘implicit and understood’ while in the Western context it is ‘explicitly expressed and dramatised’.

African writers such as Chinua Achebe uphold, in their fiction, the idea that Western declarations of love and affection may be seen as ‘melodramatic and superficial’ (Fishburn,1995:65). Achebe, for example, portrays his tragic hero Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) as a man deeply rooted in Igbo mores. For Okonkwo, any display of affection is anathema: ‘Even Okonkwo himself became very fond of the boy [Ikemefuna] - inwardly of course. Okonkwo never showed any emotion openly, unless it was the emotion of anger. To show affection was a sign of weakness; the only thing worth demonstrating was strength’ (20). While some simplistically argue that this very rootedness in Igbo customs and values is partly responsible for Okonkwo’s tragic death, it nevertheless provides the reader

of African literature with valuable insight into the nature of love and marriage in novels such as *Second-class Citizen*.

In *Second-class Citizen*, Adah's marriage to Francis Obi is essentially a practical arrangement: 'In Lagos, at that time, teenagers were not allowed to live by themselves, and if the teenager happened to be a girl as well, living alone would be asking for trouble. In short, Adah had to marry' (19). Though Adah does eventually reject her married life with Francis, it is, perhaps paradoxically, but in line with the womanist thrust of the novel, through this union that she finds a way in which 'to remove the lines of impossibility for herself' (Boyce-Davies, 1994:23). Because the marriage carries with it the potential for great fulfilment as well as frustration, the narrative voice comments on it in contrasting tones. At first, Adah 'congratulated herself on her marriage' but a page further on it becomes 'the saddest day in Adah's whole life' (20). Both observations are valid. The marriage serves to free Adah to continue her studies but it later frustrates her. Adah's writing then becomes the outward symbol of her attempt 'to author her own life' (Fishburn, 1995:70). The contrast, in narrative positioning, may be as a result of Emecheta and Adah's oscillating between and juxtapositioning of African and Western ideals.

Adah's missionary education at a young age exposes her to the niceties and customs of Europe (24) while her life at home is that of a traditional Igbo girl. This exposure to two different cultural systems later gives rise to Adah expecting her husband, Francis, to be aware of traditionally European conventions: 'They

had taught Adah all the niceties of life ... and she was to be more precious to her husband than rubies. It was all right for a man who had seen rubies before and knew their worth. What of a man who would throw rubies away, thinking they were useless stones?' (24) Adah can and does refer to both the 'traditional' African and 'new' European worldviews and she often notes that her husband is an 'African through and through' (24). (Abioseh Michael Porter is understandably unsettled by Emecheta's apparent reinforcing of racial stereotypes in the aforementioned quote and says 'Surely Emecheta knows that selfishness and inconsideration are not innate trends of African men' [1988:717]. Although uncomfortably, Porter entertains the possibility that this may be Emecheta's way of entrenching the notion that Francis *was* Adah's 'leading opponent' [717] throughout the novel.) It is because of Adah's cultural crossings that she is able to crystallise and articulate what she perceives as a difference between her ideals and those of her husband. In this respect, her position is depicted as more complex than that of either Amaka (see Chapter Two) or Li (see Chapter Four).

Therefore, a reading of Emecheta's novel requires, albeit brief, a consideration of the role of education which Kirsten Holt Petersen, a contributor to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Lindfors,1992), claims was of central significance to Emecheta: 'She insists on education and middle class values as a means of female emancipation...' (165). Adah's lifelong preoccupation with the value of an education is first nurtured when she is just a little girl and realises that school was something 'the Igbos never played with' as they believed that it was 'one's saviour from poverty and disease' (3). Adah, however, has to battle against both

her community's and Francis's stereotypical beliefs that education for women should be kept to a rudimentary minimum. Adah's mother was of the opinion that all her daughter needed was to 'write her name and count' (3). After much resistance and even public humiliation for her parents, Adah is permitted to start school. Her love for learning would accompany her till she was 'grey' as 'Adah would never stop learning' (9). Although a more comprehensive education was generally reserved for only the male members of the traditional Igbo family, Adah is allowed to continue her schooling in the hope that 'the longer she stayed at school, the bigger the dowry her future husband would pay her' (12). Francis's failure to pay any sum at all towards the bride price renders such earlier rationalising ironic. Adah, in her individual endeavour to complete her studies, exhibits much tenacity and determination, earning a reputation among her peers as 'the Igbo tigress' (15), Adah's dream of an education that would enable her 'to read Classics' and 'teach at the end of it all' (19) is thus embodied powerfully as a 'Presence that existed right beside her, just like a companion' (18).

The tension between the traditional and the new also appears in attitudes towards culturally-determined structures such as the extended family. In England, Adah manages her domestic life single-handedly. In Ibuza, her husband's family provided her with sturdy support. At the same time, there is a trend for many Africans in urban areas to view the role of the extended family as an invasive one which can deny the individual power to establish a personally chosen identity. South African newspaper and radio journalist Troye Lund claims in a newspaper

article titled 'Black youth hung up on material status' (1995) that the expectations of the traditional extended family are increasingly rejected by urban blacks.

The idealisation of a European centre inevitably exacerbates the tussle between the old and new worldviews. When Francis and Adah prepare to settle in England, a relative prays on their behalf to the goddess Oboshi. Adah's response to the intercessionary prayer creates humour in the novel because her personal struggle with tribal practices and Christian doctrines reveals the absurdity which may arise when an individual attempts to reconcile the old and the new: 'that was the trouble with being a believer in all these transcendent beings. One did not know when one aroused the anger of one or the other'(27). Adah also shows that Francis often oscillated between the old and new depending on his needs: 'As for Francis, he became a Jehovah's witness whenever he felt like it, or when he used it as an excuse for being selfish' (26). Emecheta's tone is decidedly satirical in her exposure of human nature's tendency to embrace that which is expedient. In another instance where Adah struggles to reconcile the traditional Igbo world with the Christian one, she concludes that the Christian God would disapprove of anyone eating the traditional kolanut and that this respected tribal indulgence could lead to one being 'an immediate enemy of Jehovah' (26).

From the African perspective, Adah's marriage is expected to be problematic on account of the fact that Francis does not honour the bride price. By not attending the wedding ceremony, Adah's family members show their indignation at Francis's failure to respect an age-old tradition and to validate the marriage by

doing what is culturally respectable. The practical implications of the marriage are reinforced throughout the first few chapters. Adah's in-laws are overjoyed at the 'expensive bride' (19) their son has married but failed to pay for. Emecheta focuses on the material comforts Adah and Francis enjoy as newlyweds and seals their 'escape into elitism' with Adah's ability to bear children easily: '...she was very prolific, which, among the Igbo, is still the greatest asset a woman can have' (22).

Unexpected as it may seem from a Eurocentric feminist viewpoint to focus on Adah's marriage as the catalyst which enables her 'to reconstruct and rewrite her own subjectivity' (Fishburn,1995:70), it is marriage which transports Adah to a metaphorical and literal destination that she may not have reached without the marital vehicle. By accepting marriage to Francis Obi, Adah manoeuvres herself out of Ibuza and propels herself towards a new life and re-creation of identity in England. She does glance wistfully and nostalgically over her shoulder on occasion - 'she used to ask herself why she had not been content with that sort of life, cushioned by the love of her parents-in-law, spoiled by her servants and respected by Francis's younger sisters' - but she realises 'somewhere in her heart that the contentment she had then was superficial' (23). There are contrasting moments in the novel where Adah recalls nostalgically a state of 'innocence' before 'civilisation' and the 'entangled web of industrialisation' (9) grasped her people's imagination and where she envies what appears to be the simplicity of life for earlier generations.

Adah's struggle for transformation has several frontiers. Francis, her husband, is described by her as 'an African through and through' (24). For Adah, the word 'African' implies a lack of personal choice, a second-class citizenship, which suffocates her. Although Adah struggles to move beyond the cultural impositions of her people, as her adult life unfolds, she realises that second-class citizenship for women is not exclusive to African culture. Emecheta reveals the ironic status of the African man, who, while he may relegate the woman at home to an inferior position, discovers that, on his arrival at an idealised European centre, he is a victim of a second-class citizenship imposed on him by the prejudice of whites. One passage in particular reveals the bitter and tragic frustration of the men who reach England only to have 'their dreams crushed within them' (83). Emecheta shows that in the struggle for individual self-realisation, the roles of oppressor and oppressed are determined by context. For many men, like Francis, leaving Africa to reach 'the dream of becoming an aristocrat became a reality of being black, a nobody, a second-class citizen' (83). Hence, Emecheta's novel problematises the Eurocentric/Afrocentric dilemma. The struggle for black women is compounded as they face the prejudice against gender from within their communities and the prejudice against race from without.

The idealisation of Europe and England, in particular, continues in Emecheta's delineation of Nigeria after independence. Adah says that 'going to the United Kingdom must surely be like paying God a visit. The United Kingdom then must be like Heaven' (2). In a similar way to Ama Ata Aidoo in *Sister Killjoy* (1988), (not explored here) Emecheta illustrates that the post-independence Nigerian is

mesmerised by the values of the colonising power. European values, ironically, are held in high esteem by the very voices which sought liberation from the perpetuators of these values. So while liberation has been achieved constitutionally, true liberation of the individual from European expectations has neither been achieved nor is deemed desirable.

Carol Boyce-Davies (1994) suggests that however far the journey towards the re-creation of identity may reach, readers of black women's literature must recognise the need for flexibility in 're-membering and re-connection'. In relating a migration narrative, Boyce-Davies describes a typical situation in which the 'generation of women who migrated in search of opportunity' (2) find themselves: 'My mother's journeys redefine space ... she lives in the Caribbean; she lives in the United States; she lives in America. She also lives in that in-between space that is neither here nor there, locating herself in the communities where her children, grandchildren, family and friends reside' (1). In her investigation of the experiences of black women writers, Boyce-Davies (1994:4) suggests that black women's writing should be read 'as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographically, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing'. The numerous possibilities for the presentation of women therefore also encompasses the multiple challenges women like Adah encounter. Chandra Talpede Mohanty, in her essay 'Under Western Eyes' (1991:54) warns against the multiple possibilities for the presentation of African women being forced into a single reductive category: 'It is in this process of discursive homogenisation and systematisation of the oppression of women in the third

world that power is exercised in much of recent western feminist discourse, and this power needs to be defined and renamed' (54). Women who participate in these so-called 'boundary crossings' muster tremendous courage to take what Gloria Anzaldua in Boyce-Davies (1994:16) calls 'a flying leap'. In order to prevent themselves from remaining 'a stone forever', these 'migrants' make 'a hole in the fence' so that they can 'cross the river'(16).

The strength required to make 'a boundary crossing' finds expression in the novel in literal geographic transition and a stirring in consciousness: 'So, for Adah, it was time to act or she would never go to the land of her dreams' (29). When Adah sails away from African shores and her brother, Boy, for England, she knows that life will never be 'the same again. Things were bound to change, for better or for worse, but they would never be the same' (30).

In order for women like Adah to become 'creative non-victims', an understanding of the conditions which perpetuate the socialisation of women is valuable. Esther Harding, although a western scholar of Jung, has made a number of invaluable comments about the necessity for the transformation of women. Harding (1989:1) describes the expectation that woman is 'an unconscious part of man, wholly secondary to him, without any living spirit of her own'. (The allusion here to Esther Harding's 'Genesis Myth', which is very much a product of Western thinking, is not necessarily misplaced in the context of the study of *Second-class Citizen* as Adah's missionary education would have ensured its compulsory inclusion in the school curriculum.) Harding warns that if any transformation is to

take place either in the identity of women or in the relations between men and women, the first condition which needs to be ruled out is the assumption of ‘the superiority or the inferiority of the one to the other’ (2). In the same way that Carol Boyce-Davies (1994:31) alerts us to ‘the nightmare of silencing’ women; Harding describes the type of woman who is ‘unselfconscious’ in the sense that she just ‘is’ and is for the most part ‘inarticulate’ (3). Women like Adah, who are ‘nudged’ (3) by their dreams, may cause tension in the social fabric of their communities. While Francis ‘was the male, and he was right to tell Adah what she was going to do’ (24), Julia Kristeva is quoted in ‘The Case of the Missing Women’ (Pollock, 1994:91) and says tellingly ‘That through the events of her life, a woman finds herself at the pivot of sociality – she is at once the guarantee and the threat to its stability’.

Adah’s struggle is certainly a woman’s struggle and yet her triumph takes her beyond the uncompromising battle lines drawn between the sexes. In the final pages of the novel, Adah is charged with ‘a kind of energy’ that gives her strength. Adah embarks on the last stage of the transformation of her identity when she seeks legal protection from Francis. She realises that her life with Francis would not permit her to do the ‘so many things she planned’ (174). Adah does not evade routine domesticity – if anything, she asks of life that she can be ‘a wife and mother’ (174) but she rebels desperately and intelligently against the organisation of her dreams by others. Her marriage to Francis is a sham and his physical violence eventually becomes the symbol of an internal dispossession: ‘She saw the new teaset she was paying for from the landlady’s catalogue all

broken, the flowery pattern looking pathetically dislocated' (184). When Francis burns one of Adah's manuscripts with the comment that success is beyond her because she is 'black and a woman' (178), Adah accepts that the only way she can reconstruct her identity is by building a life for herself away from such oppressive forces.

The issues in *Second-class Citizen* are certainly more far-reaching than the dynamics between the sexes. However, Adah becomes a 'creative non-victim' when, in a way unimaginable to many of the women of Ibuza whom she left behind, she accepts full responsibility for her five children and leaves the 'protection' of a 'respectable' marriage in a foreign country to assert her identity as an individual, a woman and a mother. While Adah is circumstantially hindered by the constraints of colour, class and gender, she always uses her inner resourcefulness to create an identity in which she can find meaning. In this sense, Adah is her own 'messiah'. Helen Chukwuma (1989:4) pays tribute to the initiative and creativity of Emecheta's heroines: 'Her characters adopt a positivistic view in crisis, and do not just fold their arms in tears and self-pity. Rather, they think, plan, execute and concretize. Through this maze of self assertion, the female individualism and personality shows, she appears in another light, as a person capable of taking and effecting decisions'. The struggle remains in whether society will acknowledge and accept the transformed identity of women like Adah. Sankie Nkondo ⁴ maintains that the endeavour to reconstruct and encode new meanings to a woman's life continues and that Africa's true independence will be heralded when women transform their identities: 'the

liberation of Africa is directly connected to the liberation of women' (7). The assertion by Nkondo linking the liberation of the African continent to the liberation of women finds its further explication in Zaynab Alkali's novel *The Stillborn* (1988) which has as its central character Li, a woman described as possessing 'the capacity to dream and the determination to achieve particular ends' (Alkali,1988:xiv).

NOTES

1. A single quote by John Updike originally published in the *New Yorker* and included in *Black Literature Criticism*. Volume 2 (Emecheta to Malcolm X): page 707. Edited by James P Draper. Detroit and London: Gale Research Incorporated.
 2. A single quote by Rosemary (Mary) Bray published in *Voice Literary Supplement* (June 1982) and included in *Black Literature Criticism*. Volume 2 (Emecheta to Malcolm X): page 707. Edited by James P Draper. Detroit and London: Gale Research Incorporated.
 3. In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton describes the effects of an earlier reading of Emecheta's novels by Katherine Fishburn as including 'the privileging of the concerns of western feminism, the denial of social and historical agency to women of other cultures, and the obliteration of cultural and historical difference'. In a later text, *Reading Buchi Emecheta* (1995), which has been used as a source for this study, Fishburn appears to have attempted to remedy this alleged bias or short-sightedness.
 4. A paper written by Sankie Nkondo and titled 'Depictions of African Women in Literature'. Presented at the New Nation Writers Conference at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 1990.
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LI

Li had, no doubt, matured and in the process of maturing
had become a better person with a finer soul.
Zaynab Alkali

At the time that Zaynab Alkali's novella *The Stillborn* was first published in Nigeria in 1984, 'the general feeling in Nigerian literary circles' was that the publication of this short novel (for which Alkali received a prose prize from the Association of Nigerian Authors in 1985) perhaps paradoxically (given its length), marked 'the birth of a major new talent' (Koroye,1989:47)). As the central character of Alkali's novel, Li, to a somewhat greater extent than Amaka in *One is Enough* (1981), enthusiastically embraces the tenets supported by the womanist text as it was defined earlier in the Introduction to this study. That is, while Li 'sees clearly that she must resist the role of *victim* that is the woman's traditional lot if she is to make the most of her potential' (Alkali,1988:xiv), it is also a priority for her 'to be able to establish a relationship with her husband based on the understanding of their being equal partners and not on the traditional master-dependant relationship' (viii). Several excerpts from Alkali's novella illustrate the longing, often marked by conflict and dilemma, of the women characters for the meaningful companionship of a man. Li explains to Sule, for example, that her friend, Faku, 'also had a dream, a deep need for security ... she yearned for a man's presence in her home ... but Garba could not understand. He failed to fill the vacuum in her life' (100). In another extract, Li and her sister,

Awa, discuss Li's husband, Habu: 'How can I forget the father of my child, big sister? You yourself said just now that to break up a home is like breaking a child' (88).

As Li establishes her niche in 'the great world' (Jones,1987:15), the value that she places on her connection with Habu, who, though the father of her child, is an errant husband, is especially and finally highlighted in the closing lines of the novel. In a poignant moment with her ten-year old daughter, Li is deeply moved by the realisation that she 'knew now that the bond that tied her to the father of her child was not ruptured' (105).

In further support of the womanist mode, Li also exhibits the characteristics of the 'feminist pilgrim' (referred to in the Introduction to this study). She is transformed from a 'lively, impetuous girl' (xii) into the multi-dimensional individual in Chapter Eight of the novel, who moves through 'the peak of her womanhood' (83) when she is also fondly described by her sister as being as 'restless as a goat in labour, as stubborn as a tired donkey and as arrogant as a dethroned chief' (86) towards being a woman of deep maturity in possession of 'a finer soul' (94). It is in Chapter Eight that much of Li's transformation is outlined by Alkali and where Li is 'ready to read for her Advanced Teachers' Certificate' (85) having vowed that she would not wait 'like a dog' for a man who allegedly 'cared nothing about her' (85).

Although Seiyifa Koroye, author of 'The Ascetic Feminist Vision of Zaynab Alkali' (1989), does not use the term 'womanist' when referring to Alkali's treatment of the female protagonist in African literature, she does make it immediately evident that Alkali's work deviates from that which is considered traditionally feminist. In the above-mentioned article, Koroye (1989:47) explains what she perceives to be a subtle but decidedly significant shift in Alkali's perspective especially when compared to that of other women writers in Africa:

Mrs Alkali's subject is (perhaps, predictably) woman, but her treatment of it indicates a remarkably new emphasis which is different in degree, if not in kind, from the feminist positions made familiar by novelists like Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta. An ascetic vision of the truly liberated woman informs the theme as well as the style of *The Stillborn*. ... For the image of the new woman – not a stillbirth, but a fully formed, independent person – that *The Stillborn* presents is inscribed all over with the ascetic ideals of 'determination' and 'virtue': roles and identity allotted a woman by a male-dominated society; and virtue in being able at the same time to forgive and redeem the man or men in her life...

Li displays both the above-mentioned qualities of 'determination' and 'virtue', especially towards the novella's end. Li exhibits fierce tenacity and resolve in graduating as a teacher so that she can 'assume the role of the man in the house in her father's compound' (85) which has become sad and dilapidated following Li's father's death. Some time later in the narrative, Li exercises 'virtue' in agreeing to assist the philandering Habu with his recovery after an accident in which 'all were killed except Habu' (92). Li thus shows that in the process of her transformation, she has 'grown incredibly soft' (93).

According to Koroye, it is only after Li has come to terms with the false expectations of her youthful and ultimately shattered dreams that she is in a

position to attempt to re-establish a relationship with Habu and perhaps to assist him to 'regain the will to live' (Koroye,1989:50). The Li of the final pages of the novel is a different individual to the woman that Habu marries in Chapter Six. As the novel ends, Li has accepted that her romantic dreams of Habu's being 'a qualified doctor' and their having 'no end to the luxuries the city could offer' (Alkali,1988:57) will not reach fruition as she had expected but that instead she would figuratively have 'to learn to walk again' – neither following nor leading the 'lame' Habu. Alkali's use of the pair of crutches towards the novel's close following Habu's injury in a motor vehicle accident is powerfully symbolic. While literally indicative of Habu's injury and difficulty in walking, the crutches may be seen metaphorically as a reminder that Li and Habu, after previous difficulties and emotional 'injuries', will have to renegotiate their relationship which, at the novel's end, like Habu, is in a fragile condition. Li, anticipating the possibility of a more balanced, more fulfilling relationship with her husband, concedes: 'I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk' (105).

The novel reflects too Alkali's belief that women on the African continent must strive and be encouraged to fulfil their potential. For Stuart Brown of the University of Birmingham, what makes Alkali's novel authentic from the African literary perspective is that Alkali is a native Nigerian who was 'brought up to accept the values and norms of a traditional society' (Alkali,1988:vii). Alkali's family belonged to the devoutly Muslim Tura group of the Kanuri people in northern Nigeria. However, Alkali spent her formative years in a culturally

diverse environment because, although Muslim, her family moved to the Christian village Garkida in Gongola State.

A study of *The Stillborn* compels the reader to consider closely the ways in which the black woman's identity is defined in relation to her male counterpart and how stereotyped notions of what women's roles are meant to be – culturally speaking – are frequently perpetuated. While Alkali's heroine, Li, understands early on in the novel that 'she must resist the role of victim that is the woman's traditional lot' (Alkali,1988:xiv), the reader recognises that mapping Li's journey towards a kind of liberation, of self-determination, is the essence of Zaynab Alkali's purpose in *The Stillborn*.

The context, in which many of the concerns of the African women writers chosen for discussion in this study are explored, is the merging but symbolically contrasting territories of the rural, traditional, culture-bound village and the burgeoning cityscape with its attendant modern values. Stuart Brown in his introduction to the novel questions whether or not readers of African literature should automatically set up in a Manichean-like opposition modernisation (the city) and tradition (the village). Although he suggests that so-called traditional societies in Africa must always have been in a process of gradual change and that it is the *accelerated* imposition of city and western values that has been disruptive for African society as there have been no 'cultural fundamentals' to 'structure the new society' (Alkali,1988:xix). Zaynab Alkali herself in her interview with Adeola James refers to this cultural disruption or 'culture conflict' as a 'strange

ailment' with which the 'typical ordinary northern Nigerian woman' has to 'grapple' (James,1990:30).

A juxtaposition of Theresa Nweke's assertion referred to in the Introduction to this dissertation that it is the 'old way of life' which is partly responsible for the colonisation of women and Stuart Brown's concern that the imposition of western and city values and the lack of cultural fundamentals in post-colonial and neo-colonial societies exacerbates cultural confusion and displacement, highlights the ironic double-bind and potential for disillusionment which threatens the African woman's quest for self-actualisation. In *The Voice Literary Supplement* of June 1982, Rosemary Bray similarly explains that 'between the rock of African traditions and the hard place of encroaching western values, it is the women who will be caught' (May and Lesniak,1989:146).¹

As the above argument makes explicit, the modern African woman's dilemma is that she falls between two stools. This is reflected in the setting of Alkali's novel. The village in which Li, the heroine of *The Stillborn*, grows up is portrayed symbolically as 'the stage of the ancestors, the tap root of collective and individual identity' (Alkali,1988:ix). However, for some of the novel's male characters, like Dan Fiama, who enters the narrative as the headmaster of the village school and who exits labelled by his wife as 'the chief alcoholic' (xvii), the village is idealised as 'an oasis of social order' where 'individuals' roles are clearly defined by sex, age and custom' (ix). Hence, Brown's characterisation that in *The Stillborn* the village is 'the dominant personality' because it establishes

‘the cultural and social horizons of its members’ (ix) is as sinister as it is valid for the average African woman.

However, Alkali ensures that *her* heroine, Li, rejects what for her is the claustrophobia of life in the village when, at the age of thirteen, she longs to leave her father’s compound and announces defiantly: ‘I can’t wait to get out of this hell’ (Alkali,1988:4). Li’s restlessness finds temporary release when she regularly sneaks out of the compound at night to meet clandestinely the stranger, Habu Adams, who later becomes her husband. Observing his grand-daughter, Li’s grandfather, Kaka, gives voice to the danger of the cultural fetters that traditionally bind young black girls when he warns that ‘children shouldn’t be caged...for if the cage got broken by accident or design, they would find the world too big to live in’ (25). It is essentially this sense of social incarceration that Li rejects and which she perceives as a living ‘hell’.

One of the ways in which Alkali intervenes through her writing to dismiss the marginalised identity of women is by placing Li in a confrontational stance in relation to other major characters in the novel such as her father. Consider the following extract, for example, which illustrates Li’s ‘unnatural’ – in terms of traditional expectations – lack of submission and even her outright aggression: ‘Li no longer looked fidgety. Her eyes grew bold. She was beginning to enjoy the drama’ (23). [Alkali commented in correspondence to Adeola James that ‘in African literature, women are not even adequately presented’ (James,1990:29). Alkali attempts to rectify the inadequate representation through characters like Li



and Grandma.] Li's father, Baba, as representative of the old guard, is the proverbial authoritarian. Much like Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Baba brandishes an oiled whip, but he reserves his corporal punishment for his daughters rather than for Sule, his first-born male child. However dominant his position in the compound, Li's father is presented by Alkali as being unable to ignore his daughter's powerful insight into people and situations: 'He hated to admit it even to himself, but there it was, those piercing eyes that stripped him naked and saw through his soul' (Alkali, 1988:9). The novel suggests that Baba recognises but fears his daughter's 'fearlessness': 'Li had the power to stir such emotions in him. He thought she was impudent, but it wasn't just this that worried him. It was something else' (9). Here Baba is seen to be disarmed by Li's ability to outwit him in confrontation: 'If Baba insisted on beating Sule, she was going to confuse the whole issue by confessing. That way Baba would never know who actually went out, and he wasn't one to punish anyone if in doubt. Li smiled wickedly. It seemed to her that that was one of Baba's few virtues' (24).

Underlining his traditional role, Li's father is described as having a 'mad obsession with discipline' (25) and as a man who never tires of 'playing god with his children' (24). Unlike Achebe's Okonkwo, though, Baba also reflects those who are enticed by modernisation. He is described as being bewitched by the possibility of 'modern living coupled with a foreign culture, a thing that was sweeping the whole community like wildfire' (25). So, while Achebe's novel written in 1958 focuses on the turmoil caused by the tragic hero's reluctance to embrace any of colonialism's attendant social values, Alkali's novel, written

about thirty years later, concentrates on the potent effects of city life and western mores on previously rural and traditional communities.

Alkali's characterisation of women is particularly intriguing in the portrayal of Li's step-grandmother. Recalling her earlier claim that women are not adequately presented in African literature, Alkali writes into her novel the character of Grandma – 'a self-professed priestess of the old religion' (xv) who understands 'the language of the gods' (37) and is a woman who is independent 'in a society that cannot accommodate her' (xv). There is some ambivalence for readers in the expectations that are established by the introduction of a woman such as Grandma. While the reader cannot deny her feistiness and independence of spirit (she is, after all, the woman who claims to have been married fourteen times and to have driven three wives away from the compound), she is viewed by many of the novel's characters as a 'wicked, barren woman' who is 'the root' (25) of many troubles, especially for Li's father and grandfather. Li's grandfather brands his wife 'a witch' (25) in a manner that is reminiscent of villainous characters in children's tales and folklore. Grandma or 'wise grandmother' (37) to Li in Chapter Four may represent for Alkali women who do not fit into the 'flattened-out collective thinking' (Estes,1992:227) of their communities but who have simultaneously been deprived of the opportunity of possibility because of the times in which they grew up.

In this respect, the social changes brought about during post-colonialism have benefited Li by clearing alternative paths (such as urban migration) for self-



expression which were previously denied to women like Grandma. Grandma is relegated by her community to a shadowy corner of the village compound and many of her dreams, as the title suggests, remain 'stillborn'. For Li, though, Grandma is a woman difficult to ignore. Indeed, Alkali implies that it is Grandma who, in fact, influences the nature of Li. By observing her 'wicked' step-grandmother, for example, Li learns that 'a woman need not depend on men but should rather rely on her own efforts and resources' (Alkali,1988:xvi). Thus Grandma can be seen as prefiguring Li as the embodiment of an embryonic creative essence which flowers two generations later.

In the context of the characterisation of Grandma, the writing of Jungian scholar Clarissa Pinkola Estes proves particularly valuable. In her recent work *Women who run with the wolves* (1992), Estes refers to one of the 'Tasks' which women need to complete on their journey towards self-actualisation and the retrieval of intuition: 'facing the wild hag or Baba Yaga' (1992:91). Grandma in *The Stillborn* may be Alkali's version of that part of women which refuses to be silenced or to submit to collective expectations. Grandma, like Baba Yaga in *Women who run with the wolves*, symbolises a type of 'criatura' which for traditional society represents the 'awful' in the psyches of women (93). It may be this 'awful' element too that seems to be implied in Li's father's perception, mentioned earlier, that his daughter's eyes have the power to 'pierce' through 'his soul' (9).



Ogundipe-Leslie describes the stereotypes of ‘the shrew and the witch’ as ‘incorrigible figures’ (1987:5) which are established ‘to dramatise the conflict between modernity and traditionalism’. On this basis, Ogundipe-Leslie rejects such portrayals as ‘shallow, exaggerated and false’ (5). The reader may choose to perceive Grandma either as an ‘incorrigible witch’ or as the ‘wild hag’ identified by Estes, but her characterisation would be most valuable if seen as an urgent call by Alkali to prompt women to embark on what Ogundipe-Leslie, quoting Simone De Beauvoir, terms ‘a destiny of their own’ creation (1987). While Grandma does remain a disturbing signpost as the woman who found no medium through which to express her true self, through her tirades, she constantly warns Li (as the new generation black woman) not to forfeit her individual aspirations as the following excerpt testifies: ‘Listen to my words. I was married fourteen times in the eastern part of this land. I left for this part because I could find no lion among them. ... Did I know gods of my fathers, that I was coming to meet a worse pack?’ (53). Reminiscent of writers such as Simone De Beauvoir (quoted again in Ogundipe-Leslie’s above-mentioned article) in the seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949), Alkali too encourages women to ‘escape, liberate themselves, shape their own futures and deny the myths that confine them’ (1987:10).

Estes argues that literature often reveals that men may be afraid of women’s power, and indeed, in *The Stillborn*, the relationship between Li’s grandparents is, at best, extremely tense. While Grandma claims to have possessed all the characteristics and potential of nurturing and fertility in her youth (she describes her breasts as the ‘size of backyard pumpkins’ (35) and boasts that her buttocks

were the envy of every village maiden), the novel presents the reality of a powerful woman who could not achieve transformation, who could not re-invent her identity on account of societal strictures, and who is therefore forced to remain trapped within these ‘stillborn’ dreams, referred to earlier.

Although Grandma is not able to transform her situation, she is fully conscious of the stifling nature of life in the village. Grandma paints a scathing image of the men and women in the village who have never acknowledged greater prospects towards individual fulfilment. She caustically describes the men as ‘cold slippery fish’ and the women as ‘a pack of domestic donkeys with no shame’ who are under the ‘whip of their wizard husbands’ (53). Alkali’s use (through Grandma) of the word ‘wizard’ when describing the husbands in the village provokes consideration. While Grandma is perceived by the villagers to be a sorceress of sorts and while the reader may be tempted to leave Grandma wedged in the mould of ‘witch’, the use of the word ‘wizard’ suggests that it is the male figures, the husbands, and not the female figures as stereotypically perceived, who have engaged in deception to ‘cast a spell’ over the women with the result that the women are paralysed into submission like the domesticated ass.

Chapter Five in *The Stillborn* heralds a turning point as Li announces in her endeavour to ‘re-invent’ herself that she not only wants to leave the rural chores in which she is engaged but that she also wishes to pursue her dream of ‘a paradise called the city’ (55). In an attempt to re-define her identity, Li imagines herself ‘a different woman, with painted nails and silky shining hair’ (55). The

city becomes a possible agent of change for Li and she psychologically distances herself from her early rural life: 'The bushy stream, the thorny hillside and the dusty market would soon be forgotten, in the past' (55). There would be no more 'slimy calabashes and evil-smelling goats' or 'coarse hands and feet' (55) for Li. Instead, Li smiles to herself when she visualises the 'image of a big European house full of houseboys and maids' (55).

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie offers another perspective on the dramatic contrast writers create between the rural and urban landscape. In 'The Female Writer and Her Commitment' (1987), Ogundipe-Leslie proposes that frequently when writers highlight 'the conflict of modernity and traditionalism', they portray African women who are not authentic. Ogundipe-Leslie continues that ignoring the multi-layered nature of women, writers permit stereotypes to emerge with the result that city women are usually depicted as prostitutes who are 'completely divorced from life in the country' while the rural woman speaks like 'a lobotomised idiot' about 'iron snakes' (1987:6) when referring to railways. In this vein, Ogundipe-Leslie urges women writers to reject such portrayals which, in her opinion, are displaced images from 'the mind of a male', 'a Westernised writer' or 'an educated person's view of the rural person' (1987:7). She argues that 'The naive sounding woman who does not want change and is happy with no innovation does not exist in the African countryside' (7). Like Li in *The Stillborn*, the rural woman 'wants to ride a car rather than walk; use plastics or metal instead of calabashes' and hopes to 'use a gas or electric stove instead of firewood' (7).



Li's longing to escape a place and a rural life she, as a young girl, describes as 'suffocating', 'worse than a prison' and which leaves her feeling 'trapped and unhappy' (3) brings into sharp focus the heroine's determination to head for the city, the symbol of so much possibility. An energetic discussion among Li and her siblings as they sit at the fireside in the first chapter signals that Li resists the life that her sister Awa is allegedly content to accept and Li is accused by Awa of being 'impatient and stubborn' (4). According to Awa, even Li's response to her own birth was rebellious: 'Li came with the bag of waters intact, but what frightened Mama so much was that she did not cry at birth' (6). Li's retort to the anecdote reveals further her refusal to submit to society's collective expectations of the individual: 'Well, big sister, ... I had no reason to cry. Why should I? Just to keep a tradition?' (6).

In the very first chapter of the novel, Li discloses how she feels about what she considers the drudgery of life in the village. Her perception of her mother's domestic instructions is that they are 'routine' and 'never varied' (7). Her mother's words are described as being 'always the same words in the same order' and 'even Mama's step as she walked away was mechanical' (7). (Li's relationship with her mother is at times similar to that of Adah's with her mother in *Second-class Citizen* discussed in Chapter Three of this study: 'Li did not understand their mother at all' [13].)

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie warns against the unquestioning acceptance of stereotypical characterisations of the 'sophisticated city girl and the rural woman'

(Jones,1987:6). Ogundipe-Leslie maintains that in such portrayals ‘the sophisticated woman is shown as completely divorced from life in the country or from relatives and friends who are not living in her city or sharing her night life’ (6). To some extent, this is true of the depiction of Li in the city. When Li joins Habu, her ‘only confidante’ is the landlady Hajiya: ‘The woman was her mother’s age-group and the only confidante she had in the city. Recently, they had taken to telling each other secrets’ (71). While Ogundipe-Leslie’s article suggests that exaggerated depictions of a rural setting and its inhabitants are actually the tinged result of the ‘educated person’s view of what the rural person sees, notes, values and cares about’ (7), Li herself is quite critical of what she interprets as her older sister Awa’s submission to what Sule (Li’s older brother) calls ‘a rotten life’ (3) in the village. Although young and inexperienced, Li and Sule cannot understand Awa: ‘Look at you, eighteen years old, still at home, single. Not allowed to go out at all except to the market, the riverside, the prayer house and the school. Even then you are always watched ... No, God knows, life should be better than this’ (4).

Ogundipe-Leslie’s assertion presents the reader of African literature with a challenge - a balance needs to be sought between the symbolic values of the urban and rural landscapes. The rural or pastoral landscape in literature, for the most part, offers a retreat from damaging city values, but perhaps its inhabitants do not want to be precluded from the city’s technological advances (such as the electric stove Ogundipe-Leslie offers as an example) entirely. So, if ‘the rural woman wants power, wealth and status like the men’, the article suggests that it is a



'middle-class nostalgia for the past' (Jones,1987:7) that may prevent both writers and readers from seeing this. Certainly the heroines considered in this dissertation - Li, Amaka and Adah - all acknowledge fully that the city presents them with a powerful medium of change as they move towards fulfilling their true destinies. Katherine Frank in 'Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa' (Jones,1987) encapsulates the African woman's dilemma: 'It is probably impossible to settle once and for all this long-standing debate over whether African women were better off in traditional, usually rural, milieu or whether they are happier and more autonomous in today's westernised urban centres. The evidence of anthropology is mixed... And so it remains a vexed issue' (16).

Alkali's novel appears to be written in two parts. The first five chapters show Li weaving her youthful dreams of the urban promise and venting her frustration at life in the village. From Chapter Six onwards, however, Li is confronted with a reality quite different from that which she had anticipated. She confesses in Chapter Six, four years older than she is in Chapter Five, that 'her life and hopes had been different from what they were now' (56). The 'city fever' (56) which had affected so many of the young people in the village had created illusions of large 'European houses full of servants' and 'no end to the luxuries the city could offer' (57).

In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994), Florence Stratton suggests that 'through urban migration' (103), women in African literature can achieve empowerment and economic advancement. When Li finally

embarks on her long-awaited journey to the city (she had waited more than four years to join her husband Habu whom she thought ‘she had lost to the city’ [70]), it is the beginning of a journey of self-discovery and Alkali’s interpretation of what Katherine Frank (1987:14) refers to as the ‘quest motif’. In the metropolis which Li’s sister Awa predicts ‘will come’ (56) to the village, Li is compelled to examine closely her own inner nature as well as the threads of the fabric of her community: Li’s ‘mind went back over the last four years’ (56) and, try though she may to maintain her courage in the face of disappointment, ‘with each passing day, her hopes waned and her hard protective shell began to crack’ (58).

It is at the point when Li discovers that her dreams and the reality of life in the city are irreconcilable that she becomes what Frank terms the ‘feminist pilgrim’ (Frank,1987:14) and consciously plunges into the process that will finally afford her the ‘recognition of her identity and role in the world’. This then is in harmony with Abrams’s theory in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1971:113) that identifies one of the defining characteristics of the self-actualised individual in a bildungsroman. Primarily, Li learns patience. (A powerful image is evoked in the oral tradition with the expression in Chapter Seven that ‘ a patient person could cook a rock and drink the soup’ [73].) Li is no longer easily seduced by what appears to be and she learns that marriage itself will not lead her to freedom or fulfilment. When Li is abandoned a second time by Habu, her husband, she vows ‘to go back into the world and make an independent life for herself’ (85). This line highlights much of what Li as a protagonist achieves.

Rather than permit Li to submit to the disillusionment of seeing her aspirations about marriage and urban life destroyed, Zaynab Alkali ‘intervenes’ to ensure that her heroine overcomes adversity by becoming resourceful and reliant upon self. Li announces with much the same energy that she displayed in adolescence that she ‘intended to be the most educated woman in the village and for miles around’ (85) and when she finally is reunited with her sister, Li ‘had changed incredibly’ (94). Awa observes ‘This wasn’t the sister she was used to, impetuous and critical of people. This was a different Li, tolerant and understanding.... Li had, no doubt, matured and in the process of maturing had become a better person with a finer soul’ (94).

One should view Li’s decision to return to her errant and, at times, undeserving husband in the appropriate context. Li does not contemplate a life with Habu until she has established a worthy identity and life for herself. Koroye (1989:49) reminds the reader that Li ‘successfully resists the advances of fresh suitors and completes her studies at teachers’ college’. It is only after Li has gone out ‘to make an independent life for herself’ that she discovers that, for her, emotional fulfilment with Habu will lead her to a greater sense of completeness: ‘For ten years she had struggled towards certain goals. Now, having accomplished these goals, she wished there was something else to struggle for. For that was the only way life could be meaningful’ (Alkali,1988:102).

The reader may assume on account of the powerful symbolic use of the crutches in the novel's final paragraph that Li and Habu *will* 'struggle' as they attempt to establish a more meaningful union. What counts significantly in their favour is the transformation that has occurred within them both, but, from the reader's perspective, especially in Li:

Awa shook her head thoughtfully. 'You are going back to him?' 'Yes.' 'Why, Li? The man is lame,' said the sister. 'We are all lame, daughter-of-my-mother. But this is no time to crawl. It is time to learn to walk again.' 'So you want to hold the crutches and lead the way?' Awa asked. ... 'No. I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk' (105).

Alkali's novel ends with the recognition that the identity of women in post-colonial Africa need not be crushed either by the weight of traditional norms (Hajiya helps the reader explore this theme with her account of the raw agony of being 'pushed to the background' without a brick by her in-laws because she had 'no child' [72]) nor by the harshness of neo-colonial realities and the urban landscape. Instead, Alkali's intervention as writer creates the space in which African women are permitted to 'continue to dream' with the knowledge 'that like babies, dreams are conceived but not all dreams are born alive. Some are aborted. Others are stillborn' (105).

NOTES

1. A single quote by Rosemary (Mary) Bray in the *Voice Literary Supplement* (June 1982) and included in *Contemporary Authors*. Volume 27. Edited by H May and J G Lesniak. 1989. Detroit: Gale Research Inc.

CONCLUSION

Each character brings to bear on a stifling situation
her own peculiar way of solving the problem.
Helen Chukwuma

In attempting to reach a more conclusive standpoint regarding the authentic portrayal of women in African literature and in paying tribute to their creative transformation, this chapter reviews succinctly, among a number of other issues, the specific choices made by each of the three heroines studied when transcending the triple jeopardy of colour, class and gender to become a creative non-victim.

Anaka, Adah and Li all transform their identities in their quest to reconstruct their lives differently. Each, in her own individual manner, overturns previous one-dimensional characterisations of women in African literary texts. In their personal responses to the expectations placed before them by society, especially with respect to conventional marriage and motherhood, the three protagonists navigate alternative routes to self-fulfilment and self-sovereignty.

Bearing in mind what African women writers consider crucial in the credible portrayal of African women in literature, the Introduction to *Women in African Literature Today* (Jones et al,1987:2) offers valuable comment: 'It is only with the advent of women writers, the view goes, that women begin to be objectively analysed ... it is left to the women writers ... to present female characters with a destiny of their own'.

Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Zaynab Alkali have certainly accepted in the writing of their literary texts that 'it is the African woman writer's duty to correct misconceptions about women' (Jones et al,1987:2). Supporting the findings of research such as that completed by Tuula Gordon for her study *Feminist Mothers* (1990), Nwapa, Emecheta and Alkali portray women who are 'strong and not wringing their hands in despair' but who are people who are 'in their personal lives, quite positive' and who try 'to make the best out of the lives they were living' (Gordon,1990:105). Most importantly, suggests Gordon, women, like those portrayed in the selected texts, 'are strong, they can do things ... they are not victims' (105).

In her essay titled 'The Death of the Slave Girl: African Womanhood in the Novels of Buchi Emecheta' (1982), Katherine Frank acknowledges the idea that awareness or consciousness on the part of women 'does not necessarily make the search for and development of alternatives much easier' (Gordon,1990:62) but Frank claims that while women writers 'may not be able to work great revolutions in their daily lives, as such,' they 'nevertheless radically transform them' by 're-creating their lives in literary works' (Draper,1992:713). To illustrate this point, Frank offers the example of Buchi Emecheta, who much like her heroine Adah in *Second-class Citizen*, 'had to write out her eventual liberation via writing' (Draper:713).

In keeping with the chronological order of the study of the three narratives for the purposes of this dissertation, Nwapa's heroine, Amaka, is considered retrospectively first.

Amaka's transformation begins with the portrayal in the novel *One is Enough* of a young woman who desires desperately to please not only her husband, Obiora, but also his family and, in particular, Obiora's mother, who displays her antipathy towards Amaka patently from the outset. Amaka's journey towards self-sovereignty is precipitated by her alleged inability to bear children, which, for the Igbo, as explained in Chapter Two of this study, is an issue of critical concern. Hence, Amaka's quest for an alternative path to fulfilment and happiness is brought about initially out of necessity or perhaps 'destiny' rather than choice. If Amaka had been able to bear Obiora's children immediately at the beginning of their marriage, perhaps her decision to become a woman of independent financial means in a competitive metropolis would never have been necessitated. However, Amaka's transformation begins as a journey of struggle and inner turmoil which leads to profound introspection. Unwilling to accept what she perceives as her husband's rejection of her when he marries a second, evidently fertile wife, in a culturally legitimate and acceptable practice, Amaka chooses to leave the social respectability of her marriage to Obiora. If one accepts Helen Chukwuma's proposal (1989:7) that in the writing of African women, 'the true reason for marriage emerges – love and companionship', then Amaka and Obiora's union is questionable.



Amaka's choices in facilitating her transformation, therefore, include her refusal to participate in customs such as polygyny which are held in high esteem by the general community but which leave the protagonist bereft of dignity. Like the heroines in Nwapa's other novels, Amaka confronts 'both pre- and post-colonial Nigeria' in her 'search for self-determination within the confines of culture' (Lindfors and Sander, 1993:179).

In addition, it is also through Amaka's choices that the womanist trend in the novel is explored. Although Amaka turns her back on marriage to Obiora, she does not abstain from further relations with men. While her liaison with the Alhajji is at no point in the novel romanticised, it is her union with Izu, the Catholic priest, that signposts new possibilities for meaningful relations between the sexes. Amaka rejects marriage to both Obiora and Izu, although the male characters are in few ways similar, but she pays tribute to the crucial role that Izu has played in her transformation and in her reaching her fulfilment as a woman and mother. While Amaka believes that marriage, especially in the traditional West African sense, stifles something essential within her, she does not reject the companionship of men. Nwapa's novel, therefore, ends with the heroine's clear refusal to perpetuate 'community rules and familial advice' (Lindfors and Sander, 1993:182) as she chooses her own path in life. Amaka leaves behind her eagerness and willingness to please as a daughter-in-law and dutiful spouse and embraces vigorously financial emancipation as 'a cash madam', meaningful relationships with men such as Izu and, most importantly, motherhood to her twin sons.

For Buchi Emecheta's heroine, Adah, the lack of fertility poses no threat. Adah gives birth in fairly rapid succession to five children, though her relationship with their father is abusive and destructive. Like Amaka, Adah is intelligent, educated and longs to express her own potential, not in business ventures as Amaka does, but rather in the more academic and literary sphere of writing. It is Adah's dream to study that most influences her decisions, even as a young girl, that lead to her transformation as a woman. So determined is Adah to pursue an academic life that she accepts marriage to the indulged Francis and that which ultimately can never succeed. Adah is later forced to exercise her choice yet again when she decides to leave her emotionally and physically abusive husband. Unlike Amaka's transformation, which, to all intents and purposes, is propelled by her inability to bear children, Adah's transformation is precipitated by her realisation that as a woman of Igbo descent, both at home in Ibuza and abroad in England, she will always be relegated to the inferior position of 'second-class citizen'. In reaching for alternatives by leaving Francis and later pursuing a career as a writer, Adah demonstrates that as a protagonist in one of Emecheta's novels, she is a female, who, 'even in the face of an oppressive system of deep-rooted norms and practices and belief in female subordination' (Chukwuma,1989:5), strives and asserts herself.

On account of the deteriorating nature of the relationship between Francis and Adah, it may be concluded that Emecheta's novel is less supportive of the womanist mode than Nwapa's or Alkali's. Such is the force of the realisation for

Adah that her former husband is a man not at all worthy of her love that she experiences ‘a big hope and a kind of energy, charging into her, giving her so much strength even though she was physically ill’ (Emecheta,1994:185). Francis’s claim in court that he and Adah had ‘never been married’ and that their children should be sent ‘for adoption’ (185) precludes the possibility, in a womanist sense, of any reconciliation between Adah and Francis. Unlike Amaka and Li’s, Adah’s transformation as portrayed by the novel, at least for the moment, appears to require her to be emotionally independent of a male partner. Adah’s creative transformation is by no means complete in the novel’s final chapter, but she is certainly freed to follow a more meaningful and personally-determined destiny. Adah’s new-found freedom is likened by her to a renewed sense of vision: ‘You remember the saying that a man who treated his mother like a shit would always treat his wife like a shit? That should have warned me, but I was too blind to see then’ (183).

In *The Stillborn*, Li’s transformation into maturity includes the tenuous but real possibility of reconciliation with Habu. Li, like Amaka, has to confront her husband’s affections for another woman, although Habu does not legalise his second relationship but rather conducts the affair in the city away from his rural roots. Li often expresses the sentiment that she has lost her husband to the city and that marriage to Habu has left her feeling incomplete and deceived: ‘Who was he that had married her, opened up the dam of her desire and then left her for years to burn?’ (63).

Li's transformation into 'a better person with a finer soul' (94) is accelerated by her decision to cease waiting naively for Habu to either return to her in the village or to ask her to join him in the city. Like Adah, Li turns to her studies and academic endeavours, though not as a writer, but rather as a teacher. Li's pledge that 'she intended to be the most educated woman in the village and for miles around' (85) is to some extent fulfilled when she completes her teaching qualification. The powerful sense of the possibility of transformation for women in post-colonial Nigeria is vividly captured in *The Stillborn* in lines such as the one where Li recognises that her friend Faku had deserted Garba to join 'the gang of thousands of free women all over the country' (100).

Li's creative transformation, like Amaka's and Adah's, includes the modification of most of her girlhood dreams. In a womanist manner, though, Li, having reviewed so many youthful aspirations, still cherishes the possibility that she and Habu will be reconciled permanently.

What may be deduced from the study of the characterisation of the three women in the novels chosen, in agreement with socialist feminist critic Jane Marcus, is that 'transformation, rather than permanence ... is at the heart of most women's lives' (Wilentz,1992:xv). The three protagonists not only afford readers of African literature the opportunity to contemplate authentic albeit somewhat unorthodox characterisations of women in African literature but they also demonstrate that as women they



...excel in their roles, they are forceful and articulate, thinking beings whom the reader is brought to recognise and appreciate as individuals not types. Each character brings to bear on a stifling situation her own peculiar way of solving the problem, hence we appreciate them for what they are and have become not so much what they are supposed to be (Chukwuma,1989:9).



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