THE NEGOTIATION OF GENDER AND PATRIARCHY IN SELECTED NIGERIAN AND SOUTH AFRICAN PLAYS

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that

The Negotiation of Gender and Patriarchy in Selected Nigerian and South African Plays

is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged.

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A. O. Oloruntoba

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Date

DEDICATION

This research work is dedicated to my mother:

Mrs. Eunice Omodunke Oloruntoba

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I am grateful to God Almighty for granting me the grace, strength and enablement to complete this project. If I were to count on my power, I do not have any; if I were to rely on my might, does the life that I live even belong to me? What might do I have of my own? I am certain that by His spirit, He made everything possible. I return your praises to you.

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ABSTRACT

Of all human identity categories such as race, religion, culture, class and gender that a person might belong to, race and gender are arguably two of the most contentious in the world. This study takes gender as its main focus, exploring how gender, gender oppression, patriarchy and resistance are negotiated in selected dramatic literary works emanating from Africa's two literary giants, Nigeria and South Africa. It thus aims to bring two distinct literary traditions into dialogue with one another in order to clarify our understanding of how gender is articulated and inscribed across different contexts. Selected works from Nigeria include *Aetu* (2006), *Little Drops* (2011), *Abobaku* (2015) all by a single playwright, Ahmed Yerima, who has been described as one of the most outspoken feminist playwrights in the country. Other plays from South African context include *So What's New?* (1993) by Fatima Dike, *Weemen* (1996) by Mthali Thulani, *Flight from the Mahabarath* (1998) by Muthal Naidoo and *At Her Feet* by Nadia Davids (2006). Of particular interest in this study is the question of how these plays explore the specific forms of gender discrimination which arise in the context of religious, traditional and cultural practices such as domestic violence against women, child marriage, wife inheritance, polygamy and property-sharing after the death of a husband or father. These texts, all written from a feminist perspective, foreground different understandings of what a woman and a mother is in the African context. They also offer differing articulations of gender-based resistance. The study employs an eclectic blend of western and African feminist/womanist frameworks in order to decipher how these plays comment, and reflect, on the issue of gender inequality. In so doing, the aim is to bring these distinct theoretical and ideological traditions into dialogue with one another. A further aim is to assess to what extent these plays draw on, or are aligned with, various strands of western and African feminist theorizing whilst also offering an understanding of literary texts as sites of theory-making in their own right. The study further explores the echoes, conjunctions, entanglements and disparities that are revealed by bringing these texts from different contexts into dialogue with one another. In this process, the chapter also explores the extent to which these plays can be aligned with the often polarized discourses of western and African feminist theories, thus contributing to a broader understanding of gender, gendered societies and gender-based oppression in African contexts. Finally, this study seeks to arrive at a new theoretical feminist framework for reading these texts: what I have called 'Consequentialist feminism' is an approach which seeks to

transcend the binaries between western and African feminist theorizing by focusing on the consequences of women's choices in particular contexts of engagement and response.

Key terms: Feminist drama, African feminist drama, gender, gender inequality, gender oppression, patriarchy, feminism, femininity, womanhood, masculinity, sexuality, gender-based violence, Nigerian drama, South African drama, consequentialist feminism

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INTRODUCTION: WRITING GENDER AND FEMINISM/AFRICAN WOMANISM IN SELECTED DRAMATIC LITERATURE FROM NIGERIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

Background

This study seeks to explore the manner in which the questions of gender, gender oppression, patriarchy and resistance are negotiated in selected examples of contemporary Nigerian and South African drama. It examines how these plays – written in similar periods yet in different contextual milieus, and by different playwrights – address the question of gender through various dramatic delineations. The playwrights who have been chosen for this study are specially selected from what could be regarded as two of Africa's most influential countries in terms of economy, cultural history and literary prowess, namely Nigeria and South Africa. Selected plays from Nigeria include *Aetu* (2007), *Little Drops* (2011) and *Abobaku* (2015) by Nigerian playwright, Ahmed Yerima. Yerima is one of the most prolific playwrights in the Nigerian literary scene. With over fifty plays to his name, he has won numerous awards and has received accolades both within and outside Nigeria. His concerns in writing are extensive and profound and touch on questions of history, politics, culture and religion. His particular attention to the plight of women and their acceptance of, indifference to, and resistance against traditional, cultural and societal norms and pressures will receive keen attention in this study.

From the South African context, I have selected a quartet of writers who I consider representative of the contemporary feminist South African drama scene. The first writer I have chosen in this category is Cape Town-born Nadia Davids. She is the youngest of these playwrights and still actively involved in writing; she has published three award-winning plays, namely, *At Her Feet* (2006) which I analyse in this study, *Cissie Gool* (2009) and *What Remains* (2017). The other three playwrights are Fatima Dike, Thulani Mtshali and Muthal Naidoo all playwrights who started writing pre-1994 – the year South African officilally ended apartheid through its first multiracial elections. Dike's play, *So What's New?* (1993) Mtshali's *Weemen* (1996) and Naidoo's *Flight from the Mahabarath* (1998) were published in the 1998 anthology *Black South African Women*, edited by Kathy Perkins. The anthology is one of the first to focus exclusively on the lives and experiences of black South African women. The plays that I discuss have a wide historical scope and geographical reach and address topical socio-political and cultural themes in both South African

and Nigerian contexts. Whilst concentrating on contemporary issues, they also open up further questions relating to the future of gender on the continent.

I must state right upfront that although the plays and playwrights selected for this thesis are asymmetrical in terms of the playwrights' gender and the number of plays selected, there are cogent reasons for this choice. Nigeria is a nation known for its literary prowess; thus one would question why just one playwright, and a male for that matter, has been selected as the main focus of a study of Nigerian feminist drama. How, for example, can I justify the omission of female playwrights such as Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo and Irene Salami-Agunloye? My argument is that feminism in Nigeria, as well as more globally, has tended to be associated with women writers. As a result, there has been a lack of scholarly attention to male-authored texts and perspectives on questions of gender, feminism, femininity and masculinity. Ahmed Yerima's oeuvre offers a sustained and nuanced exploration of these issues, one which deserves to be explored in more detail. In addition, the critical neglect of Yerima's work is arguably related to his gender, which is generally associated with patriarchy or anti-feminism. This does not seem to be a valid reason for ignoring his works and for this reason, I argue, it seems necessary to address this scholarly gap. With regards to the choice of South African playwrights for this study, my selection was motivated by the historical period in which this work was produced. Writing at the tail end of apartheid and in what has come to be known as the post-transitional period, Fatima Dike, Thulani Mthali and Naido Muthal nevertheless do not allow apartheid themes to dominate their work. Instead, they look beyond the apartheid context to explore questions of gender and gender-based oppression, questions that were often denied or occluded during the apartheid period. I chose to work on just one play from each of these playwrights because, unlike like Yerima, they have not published many plays. In this study, Nadia Davids is importance as a post-millenial playwright who offers a unique treatement of gender concerns in the South African context. Although relatively young in the field of feminist theatre, her plays have become relevant within the nation due to the intersectional dimension which her plays explore.

The problem of patriarchy and gender inequality as it has been generated, perpetrated and maintained by culture, religion and other socio-political systems has been explored extensively on the African continent through different methods such as activism, theoretical propositions and literary or fictional representations. The many writers who fall into the latter group include

Ghanaian playwright and novelist, Ama Ata Aidoo, Zimbabwean writers, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Yvonne Vera and Cameroonian writers, Juliana Makuchi, Ghanian Efo Kọdjo Mawugbe and Calixthe Beyala. In Nigeria specifically, work by novelists Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, playwrights Tess Onwueme, Stella Oyedepo and Ifeoma Okoye have been important. From the South African context, mention could be made of the work of Sindiwe Magona, Bessie Head, Zöe Wicomb, Zukiswa Wanner, Lara Foot-Newton, Malika Ndolvu, Yael Farber and Makhosazana Xaba, amongst many others. The common preoccupation amongst these writers with the roles and experiences of women in colonial and postcolonial African societies may be seen as marking a shift from an earlier period in which writers tended to focus on the violence of colonialism and apartheid. For many African women writers in particular such as Dangarembga, Aido, Adichie, a pressing concern has been to revise an earlier tradition of African men's writing and the tendency to represent women as 'great mother', 'mother earth' or 'mother of the Nation, Mother Africa and their definitions in relation to men, a position that bears some resemblance to the work of French sociologist, Simone de Beauvoir and her condemnation of the notion that women are inessential or 'other'. The specific contribution of this study is to investigate how questions of gender, patriarchal oppression and resistance or lack of it, are negotiated in the genre of late twentieth century African feminist drama specifically. In this regard, the focus falls on what has come to be described as 'third generation', post-apartheid or post-transitional literary engagements with gender questions (the definitions of which I will go on to explore later in the Introduction); in this thesis, as suggested already, the focus falls on the specific contribution of feminist dramatic literature to the wider literary scene.

The texts studied in this thesis fall within this period and explore one of the many thematic preoccupations of literature of this period. In this study, the subject of gender becomes the focus. In many African societies, the claws of culture and religion continue to hinder the emancipation of African women in the present. These themes are uniquely treated in the plays selected for this study. For examples, in Yerima's *Aetu*, a woman becomes the property of the family of her late husband. After the death of her husband, she is forced to marry and have children for her late husband's brothers. Yerima's play offers a critique of this practice by focusing on the violence experienced by this character as a result of this cultural institution and her unique strategy of resistance. The South African play, *Weemen*, presents domestic abuse fostered through cultural and social norms. The rest of the plays also offer different perspectives on the concerns of gender

and patriarchy as perpetrated by culture and religion. This study takes the exploration of gender a bit further from what is often highlighted amongst African feminist scholars: in its focus on the oppression of the 'other' by dominant men, it extends its purview to include the exploration of masculinity. The form of masculinity explored here is not limited to just hegemonic masculinities (although this is the dominant form of masculinity explored in the study) but also includes other forms of masculinities such as subordinate, marginalised and toxic masculinities. The goal of this study therefore is to explore the ways in which these plays articulate the continuing influence and effects of religious, traditional and cultural practices on the lives of African women (and men) and how oppressed or subaltern groups resist and react to these patriarchal ideologies.

As such, this research is situated within a larger, global or universal framework of human rights discourse. My analysis of the plays is thus particularly attuned to global concerns with the human rights of the girl-child, freedom of religious association/practice and, most importantly, gender (in)equality; in this way, I add my voice to the ongoing global discourse on human rights. According to American author, Robert Meister, "the twenty-first century [has] become the century of human rights" (1992:1). The first declaration of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (1948) that "[all] human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) is now taken more seriously all over the world. Despite the serious emphasis and seriousness placed on these rights, women's rights remain one of the most violated among human rights laws. This, despite that fact in the last century, gender discrimination of various kinds, along with racism, has begun to receive greater attention. For example, while Yerima's *Aetu* explores the rights of a girl-child to freedom from torture, freedom of speech and freedom of thought, Davids'*At Her Feet* draws attention to freedom of conscience and religion and freedom of movement. In similar fashion, Yerima's *Little Drops* highlights the rights to adequate living standards, water and sanitation. In all the plays selected for this study, the human right to freedom and equality form the underlying premise of the plays' concerns.

This study is motivated by my interest in the way drama has been used in both Nigeria and South Africa as an effective agent of education, socialisation, enlightenment and most importantly, conscientization or activism. Classic plays such as Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960), *Madmen and Specialists* (1970) and *The Chattering and the Song* (1977) and South African plays,

Sizwe Bansi is Dead and *The Islands* (1973) by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona (1972) and Gibson Kente's *How Long* (1974) and *Too Late* (1974) are examples of plays within the Nigerian and South African contexts that have served to arouse people's consciousness to certain socio-political issues in the periods when they were written. Curious after the reading of these plays and interested in the ways identities and sub-alternities are negotitated, I became motivated to explore how these issues are negotiated in the literature of these two great countries. Having studied and worked in South Africa for a period of years and observed how gender issues in literature have come to replace the role that was previously ascribed to race in the apartheid era, my desire to explore gender soon grew and drew me to this study which eventually led to the texts selected. A further motivating factor is that very few of the texts selected for this study have received sustained academic attention. This, despite their immense contribution to gender concerns and the opposition to patriarchy.

The study contributes to the scholarship on gender in literature in several ways. First, it draws attention to how these issues are engaged in the genre of dramatic literature, a mode of literary expression which, despite its humanizing and developmental qualities and its particular significance in exploring gender concerns, has been neglected by literary critics in favour of other literary forms. It is this lack of critical engagement, coupled with what the dramatic form offers in terms of social, political, cultural and other kinds of human critical engagement to human development, that leads to my preference for this genre over others. As such, this research seeks to fill an important gap in the scholarship on the literary representations of gender in African contexts.

Second, it brings plays from the different contexts of Nigeria and South Africa into dialogue with one another, thus offering a rare comparative perspective. By adopting a dialogic and comparative approach, the study looks to clarify our understanding of how gender is articulated and inscribed across different contexts. This dialogic knowledge – knowledge or concepts derived from or based on a comparative study of the two different social and literary contexts – is achieved through the reading and analysis of the gender ideologies and gender themes articulated in the plays. Here, careful consideration will be given to points of convergence and divergence and their significance: what echoes, conjunctions, entanglements and disparities are revealed by bringing these texts into

dialogue? And how do these contribute to understandings of gender, gendered societies and gender-based oppression in African contexts?

Third, this study seeks to examine how the often-polarized discourses of western and Afro-centric feminisms can be seen as speaking to, or feeding off of each other, rather than re-emphasizing their often-discussed differences. In this respect, the study adopts a dialogic methodology in relation to theory itself, thus offering an unusual perspective on the inter-connections as well as differences between western and African feminisms.

Finally, the proposed research seeks to engage with the plays as important or hidden sites of 'theory-making'. In other words, it investigates the extent to which these plays can be regarded as producing or offering a 'theory' of gender, albeit in literary-dramatic form. This enquiry arises from the recognition that theory-making can take a variety of forms and that, in the African context, it is likely to be found in unusual places. Pumla Gqola makes this assertion when she argues that "representations in creative texts are seen as enriching the variety of possibilities for Blackwomen's theories in Africa" (2001:11). Similarly, my reading of the selected plays in this thesis has a dual focus: I am interested not only in textual re-presentations – which according to Fortun Kim functions within "a wider symbolic, discursive and political economic context" (2009: ix) of gender and women's oppression – but also in the way in which these plays articulate, construct, deconstruct and reconstruct feminist and womanist ideologies.

Reflections on Drama

A famous speech in William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* (1599-1600) describes the objective of drama as being "to hold … the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of time his form and pressure" (Act 111, Scene 2, Lines 17-20). In a similar manner, American theatre critics Oscar Brockett and Robert Ball observe that

> theatre/drama has perhaps the greatest potential as a humanizing force, because much of it asks us to enter imaginatively into the lives of others so we may understand their aspirations and motivations. Through role-playing, we come to understand who and what we are and see ourselves in relations to others. In a world given increasingly to violence and tension among ethnic and other diverse groups, the value of being able to understand and feel for others as human beings cannot be overemphasized (2004:16).

In other words, Ball and Brockett argue that drama helps to revive if weakened, restore if dead and create if lacking, such human feelings that are needed for humans to live harmoniously among themselves. Drama consists of unique ways of expressing and exploring feelings among humans. With drama, feelings are created, events are recreated, and ideas are formulated and reformulated. Since the study focuses on the aspect of human experience that deals with the forms of inequality that arises as a result of gender and sex, the genre of drama presents a particularly apt medium for the exploration of these issues. It is this potential of the dramatic form to imaginatively enter the lives of African woman that has provided the primary motivation for this research. While I am interested in the implications of dramatic form for the articulation of these issues, I must state that my focus falls on the literary-textual rather than the performative aspects of the plays under discussion. Rather than performance or playing, the study looks at drama as literary text, at the plays as examples of 'dramatic literature' or what English author Lizbeth Goodman refers to as "the study of drama" (2003:5).

Dialogue 1: Nigeria and South Africa

As I have suggested, this study seeks to bring the two literary-cultural contexts of Nigeria and South Africa into a productive dialogue. In doing so, it takes its cue from studies by Rebecca Fasselt (2015) and Aghogho Akpome (2016) both of which seek to place Nigerian and South African literature in the same conceptual-comparative frame. As Akpome suggests, Nigerian and South African literature has come to be seen as "highly representative of contested spaces in the postcolonial world in general, and in Africa in particular" (1). Writing further, he rightly observes that "dominant perceptions and depictions of contemporary Africa are constituted significantly by images, narratives, tropes, memories, and experiences originating from, and associated with Nigeria and South Africa" (5). By encouraging a comparative approach to Nigerian and South African feminist drama, this study hopes to explore some of the connections and differences across these literary terrains. As such, this study addresses a further significant gap in the literature.

Rebecca Fasselt (2015), Ainehi Edoro (2015) and Aghogho Akpome (2016) refer to these countries as literary giants of Africa. Writing about the need for a dialogic conceptualization between the literatures of these two nations, in his study, Akpome observes that his study "brings

the parallel conceptualizations of recent literary production in the two domains into revealing and much needed dialogue" (2016:13) since literatures from these nations are "sorely lacking dialogue" Fasselt (2015:23). Therefore, this study can be seen as part of the ongoing intellectual attempts to fill the void that exists in terms of the links, connections and the need for dialogue regarding the literary traditions of these two nations. To achieve this, this study echoes the methodology adopted by Akphome where he places South African and Nigerian texts into the same historiographical frame. But where his concerns are with the trajectories of literature in Nigeria and South Africa between 2000-2010 following momentous socio-political developments, this study is more interested in the question of gender and how cultural, social and religious practices foster gender oppression in these countries as represented in the texts. Also, while Akpome's study deals with the prose genre, this study focuses on the dramatic form – a literary genre that has not garnered as much critical study as the genre of prose.

Dialogue 2: Western and African Feminisms

As suggested above, an innovative aspect of this study is to extend the dialogic approach to feminist/womanist theorizing itself and to look at these theories from a dialogic standpoint. This is prompted by the unending epistemological tussle between western and postcolonial feminisms, the latter defined as feminist concepts originating from or about the countries of the global south or those nations that were previously colonised. According to Obioma Nnaemeka, western feminist theorising does not adequately address the actual or real-life concerns of African women. In other word, there is a space outside its (western) ideologies which it cannot address. Therefore, the empty space outside western feminist theories and the actual experience of African women needs to be explored. Nnaemeka refers to this space as the "third space" where ideologies can coexist and not repel each other:

> The third space is not the either/or location of stability; it is the both/and space where borderless territory and free movement authorize the capacity to simultaneously theorize practice, practice theory, and allow the mediation of policy. [The space] allows for the coexistence, interconnection, and interaction of thought, dialogue, planning, and action, constitutes the arena where I have witnessed the unfolding of feminisms in Africa. (2004:360)

Nnaemeka suggests that this is space where theory and practice come together, where feminist theories, be they western or not, consciously address the actual experiences of African women. To strengthen her argument about what I term 'cooperative feminisms', Nnaemeka suggests that "seeing feminist theorising through eyes of the 'other,' from the 'other' place, through the 'other' world-view has the capacity to defamiliarize feminist theory as we know it and assist it not only in interrogating, understanding, and explaining the unfamiliar but also in defamiliarizing the familiar in more productive and enriching ways" (381). Pumla Gqola's work, "Ufanele Uqavile: Blackwomen, Feminisms and Postcoloniality in Africa" (2001) offers a similar perspective. She argues that "theories from Blackwomen-centric spaces are no longer just concerned with writing back – to white feminists, to colonialism, to patriarchy, to apartheid, etc. – but are about refashioning the world in exciting ways where the difference within is not a threat but a source of energy" (11). Gqola's argument also addresses that fact that African feminist theories/theorists have taken a step away from more confrontational feminist ideologies to those which seek to achieve something positive and progressive for them. What I take from Nnaemeka's concept of third space and Gqola's blackwomen feminism are two ideas: first, that the differences between or peculiarities of theory and practice should be productively explored; and, secondly, that the unique feminist theories originating from these two spaces (western and African) should not be considered solely as polarized; but rather, that they should be brought into dialogue or mediation, as Nnaemeka calls it, with one another.

These scholars' ideas are very productive for my discussion because my application of feminist theories in this study depends on their relevance to the gender concerns raised in the texts. This means that I incorporate western and African feminist theories where it seems appropriate. Also, when or if the concern of gender raised in the text can be seen as engaging with both of these theories, I apply them simultaneously to the concern. In doing so, I do not confine myself to one or the other but allow for incorporation, dialogue and mediation when required. By so doing, I open up a third space for analysis of these theories in relation to African plays. To proceed with the study, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the literary environments within which these texts originate.

Background to Nigerian and South African Literature

Literature in Nigeria has been periodised by critics using different parameters such as time, thematic preoccupation, writing styles and writers. Also important has been the concept of the literary 'generation' with Nigerian literature classified in terms of the first, second or third generation of Nigerian writers. According to Rotimi Fasan, the first generation of writers was concerned with "themes of cultural alterity, recuperation, urban versus rural life, and the encounter between the indigenous and imported cultures of Nigeria and Europe while calling for an end to colonial rule" (2010: 39). The first generation writers, literary path-finders or "apostles", as Taye Awoyemi-Arayela (2013) calls them, are understood as the pace-setters of post-independence Nigerian literature. These writers put Nigerian literature on the world literary map. Recognition was based on their thematic preoccupations, writing styles, period (time) and their firm grip on the English language in comparison to the previous less recognized writers of the colonial era. After independence in 1960, these writers turned within the nation to write about the political dissatisfaction with post-colonial leadership. Chief amongst these writers are Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, John Pepper Clarke-Bekerderemo, Ola Rotimi and Duro Ladipo. These writers shaped the beginning of what was later going to be Africa's most vibrant literary environment. One thing that gave these playwrights this global recognition was the fact that their ability with the English language meant that they were able to court the attention of the western world who unapologetically had taken on the role of judge and scrutinizer. From the above discussion, it is clear that the first generation writers are the vanguard of Nigerian literature in English. However, their tendency to remain within a particular set of themes meant that their writing was somewhat restricted in scope.

The second generation of Nigerian writers introduced more socially radical and engaged writings onto the scene. They labeled the earlier generation as overly pessimistic and tragic in their writing. An example of this criticism is presented in the play *No More The Wasted Breed* (1983) by Femi Osofisan which can be seen as a counter to Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* (1973). The play offers a social critique to Soyinka's condemnation of special breed – referred to as the *carrier* (which I consider metaphorical of a particular lineage of people) for the failure of their leaders. Rather, the failure and development of the society should be collective. Rather, the play suggests, the failure and development of the society should be understood as a collective responsibility. Having burst

onto the scene in the early 1970s and early 1980s, these writers see literature as more forceful and socially interactive than the earlier generation. Fasan notes that these writers "write socially-relevant, highly critical (some of them with a Marxist-proletarian bent) literature [and used] highly accessible, people-oriented language" (2010:40). Tess Onwueme, Femi Osofisan, Niyi Osundare, Wale Ogunyemi and several female writers such as Zulu Sofola, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Bode Sowande are front-runners of this generation of writers. Ahmed Yerima became part of this generation later on in the early 1980s. Although some scholars have classified him among the groups of writers labelled the third generation, I chose to classify Yerima in a more fluid way as situated somewhere between the two generations. He appears to link the the ideas of the second and third generations together. Just like the second generation writers, his writings are idealistic, Marxist and socially conscious. As I go on to show, his writings also embody some the themes and ideas of the third generation.

The third generation refers to writers who came onto the literary scene in the mid-1990s when Nigeria was in a state of political turmoil; these writers are still very active in the present. Military rule, economic and infrastructural breakdown as well as high rates of poverty were (and still are) some of the issues the country struggled with at this time. The work of earlier female writers of the late 1970s also encouraged the emergence of more women writers in the post-1990 period. As mentioned earlier, these writers not only write about ongoing political turmoil, but have expanded their political concerns to include the question of gender. Prominent among these writers are Helon Habilla, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani, Ben Okri, Biyi Bamidele, Zaina Alkali, Segun Afolabi, Ben Tomoloju and many others. Some critics have claimed that there is no third generation writers, arguing that they cannot name any distinctive ideological or stylistic differences between these two sets of writers. However, I would suggest that a critical study of the development of Nigerian literature in the last sixty years proves that the present crop of writers are more responsive to present situations than the previous generation.

In South Africa, a similar periodic enunciation is adopted to classify its literature. While the idea of generation is beginning to gain prominence, the conceptualization of South African literature has tended towards a political paradigm. Historical events such as apartheid, the transition to democracy and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) are generally used to delineate South African literature. As Mary Corrigall rightly observes, "any representation of South African

life is burdened by its history" (2009:25). While much of the literature of the apartheid era has been described as protest literature due to its activitist preoccupations, the literature which has arisen in the transitional and post-apartheid periods has tended to take different forms and has been described in different ways. For instance, Michael Chapman describes the period after the demise of apartheid as "post post-apartheid" (2009:1) while Erik Doxtader applies the phrases "second transition" and "a third phase of transition" (2001:23). Meg Samuelson (2008), Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie (2010) prefer the term 'post-transitional' while Russ West-Pavlov advances the term "after postcoloniality" (2015:42). All these theorists agree that some kind of threshold is necessary, that the thematic preoccupations of the 'after-apartheid' are different from those of the apartheid era. This is confirmed by Frenkel who observes that "post-transitional South African literature suggest[s] something of the character of … a new wave of writing, which is often unfettered to the past in the way that much apartheid writing was but may still reconsider it in new ways" (2010:2). Going further, they argue that post-transitioanl South African literature "exhibits a reduced obligation to the logics of political commitment and that it purposely contests the national as its overriding context" (4). However, critics such as Chris Thurman (2010), Michael Titlestad (2010), David Medalie (2010) Nedine Moonsamy (2014) and Akpome (2016) have questioned the validity and sustainability of these episodic methods of classification not just because some of the themes of texts of pre-1994 are still found in today's texts which proves that this literature is still in transition and therefore continues to evolve but notably because transition cannot be said to have been completely achieved.

As these scholars have suggested, the classification of South African literary history in temporal terms has been incapable of addressing the different temporalities that transpire 'in between' history. Chris Thurman, for instance, asks: "how can there be such a thing as 'post-transitional literature' (which would imply that we have completed a transition)? Aren't we still in a process of transition from apartheid to something else?" (2010:91). Nedine Moonsamy makes a similar point, argung that the "post" in post-transitional is "untimely" [and]an "illusion of escape [that] is somewhat premature" (2014:2) given that the transition remains an ongoing process. In a similar vein, Aghogho Akpome argues that the "idea relies – whether intentionally or not – on a limiting conception of South Africa's contemporary socio-political history and transition in terms that are inevitably linear and teleological" (2016:39). Arguing further and this time, extending the argument to other classifications of African literature (such as the first, second and third

generations of literature) that employ teleological and linear method of mapping literary history, Akpome posits that "contemporary African literatures (much more than literatures from the western world for example) may be generally understood as literatures of transition" (2016:13) and not literature that can be categorised according to periodic events of history. Although Akpome offers a means to classify literature from South Africa, his classification is one that can be considered as more appropriate for this literature because of its offering of transition – a form that can be applied to literature of the present as well as literature of the future. Also pertinent to this discussion, with specific reference to the periodization of national history in South Africa, is Ivan Vladislavić's observation that "history doesn't work like that; no matter how spectacular the transitions and changes are, it doesn't fall into neat compartments and chapters. And certainly, in one's lived experience, it's a much greyer, more muddled process" (cited in Thurman, 2010: 91). These arguments align with western scholars such as feminist historian Victorian Browne who argues that "historical time should be understood as polytemporal. It is an internally complex, 'composite' time, generated through the interweaving of different temporal layers and strands" (2014:2). The deduction from these scholars' arguments is that they all argue that history should not be understood as 'event-ful and phase-ful'. However, despite this existing debate, one must not undermine the role of salient events that define different times and moments in the course of history creation.

Contextualization: Nigerian and South African Drama

In this section I present a brief overview of the fields of Nigerian and South African drama, respectively, as a prelude to the more specific exploration of individual authors and contexts which is included in the chapters that follow. The Nigerian drama scene is broad and well-studied. Much like that of many other African countries, Nigerian drama started from ritual and festival ceremonies. According to Dapo Adelugba, Olu Obafemi and Sola Adeyemi, "Nigeria has a long theatre history reaching back to the numerous ceremonies, religious rituals, and community festivals that define the existence of the people" (2004:138). The performances include but are not limited to the *Egungun*/masquerade festivals, marriage ceremonies, worship or celebration of deities, *Eyo* festival, the *Gelede*, Bornu puppet show and many more which later mutated into entertainment performances. Although there has been debates about whether these performances

can be seen as examples of drama, I argue that since they consist of the major components of theatre – performer, spectator, performance, costume and props, exposition, rising action, climax and resolution – they should be understood in this way. According to Awam Amkpa, festival performance provided a "symbolic interpretation of social reality that facilitated communication, socialization, and community. [They] bond performers and spectators together in a surreal journey of empowerment that carried real potential of collective action" (2004:5). Early ritual performance was succeeded by theatrical performances that were later known as traveling or popular theatre. Herbert Ogunde's *Alarinjo* traveling theatre in the early 1940s – the first theatre company in the country – led the transition from ritual performance to entertainment and enlightenment shows (Adedeji, 1969, 1978); (Banham, Hill & Woodyard 2005). After this came the more academic theatre which developed in the universities. Here, the University College of Ibadan, now the University of Ibadan, led the way in the sense that it was here that the first department of theatre arts was opened. This was also where the early plays of Wole Soyinka and his theatre troupe were performed. It is in this period, in the early 1950s, that Nigerian theatre developed into a form of remonstration against colonial rule and cultural repression. Just like in the case of South African literary history, recent concerns have broadened in scope to include a wide range of robust issues such as gender, ecology, ethnicity, contemporary politics, medicine, science and security/insecurity in the twenty-first century. However, the many playwrights such as Duro Ladipo, Femi Osofisan, Dapo Adelugba who came after Wole Soyinka and his contemporaries soon began to acquaint themselves with more contemporary, modern and global topics such as human rights, environmental justice and gender equality; they also offered a growing critique of political developments in postcolonial Nigeria such as corruption and a variety of anti-democratic trends including military rule. Since the late 1950s, Nigerian drama has been responding to and engaging with cultural, socio-political, gender, religious and other national and international concerns: (Adedeji 1978; Irele and Ogunba 1978; Clark 1980 and Jeyifo 1981).

In South Africa, drama can be traced back to the nineteenth century oral traditions of the earliest dwellers in the country: the Khoisan. This included ritual and traditional ceremonies such as initiation rituals, harvest festivals and weddings. The work of BL Leshoai, Temple Heuptfleisch, Martin Orkin and others support this claim. For instance, Leshoai opines that theatre in South Africa, particularly black South Africans, "has its roots in traditional story-telling, poetry, dances, songs, proverbs, and riddles" (1978:115). Hauptfleisch also states that, "the oldest known

performances in [Southern Africa] are the shamanic dances among the San, recorded in certain San rock art paintings – some of them up to 25 000 years old, some dating back to the nineteenth century" (2007:73). For Orkin, the earliest twentieth century saw drama being used "to propagate [the apartheid] beliefs". Drama was used to "communicate or reproduce colonial discourse which often represented the south African ruling classes, and particularly their preferred religious discourses, as the bringers of civilization and order to an otherwise barbaric people" (1991:7). By the early twentieth century, poetry, novels and later short stories had become the dominant literary forms; in the latter part of the twentieth century, much of this took the form of protest writing. Also, from the early 1950s onwards, we see the emergence of township theatre as well as a vibrant tradition of protest plays including the work of Athol Fugard, Gibson Kente, Dennis Walder, Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema, Barney Simon and Zakes Mda. Describing this form of drama as a "truly South African theatre tradition" (2005:11), Greg Homann, Martin Middeke and Peter Paul Schnierer note that this theatre form was caused by existing apartheid laws and artists' desires to contribute to the fight against all forms of inequality. Therefore, "apartheid legislation, censorship laws and boycotts ironically contributed to the groundswell of the new indigenous South African English plays" (2005:11).

At this time, not only were there few female playwrights, the number of plays that explored the lives and experiences of black South African women was also very small since there was more focus on dismantling the aparthied government. However, the late 1970s and early 1980s saw a number of male playwrights writing about the lives of the black South African women; this was followed by the emergence of women playwrights writing about similar themes. Some of the most well-known plays include Fatima Dike's *Glass House* (1979); *Have You Seen Zandile?* (1985) by Gcina Mhlophe, Zakes Mda's *And The Girls in Their Dresses* (1988); Ismail Mahomed's *Cheaper Than Roses* and *Purdah* and Magi Noninzi William's *Kwa-Landlady* (1992), *Sisters of Calabash* (1994) and *The Good Woman of Sharkesville* (1995). However, since the official end of apartheid and the first inclusive democratic government took office in April 27, 1994, we have seen South African drama deviating from the nearly monothematic concentration on apartheid and TRC issues to include a broader range of concerns. Writing about this, David Graven observes that post-apartheid plays "look beyond the narrow concerns of anti-apartheid struggle to more abiding cultural realities" (1999:1). This post-apartheid South African drama now "shows keen interest in contemporary social inequalities" (7). As Miki Flockemann argues, "oppositional discourses of

protest and resistance [were] replaced by an emphasis on social issues within, rather than between communities" (2002:236). In Bain's observation, post-apartheid South African "theatre practitioners and practices have developed in various directions as they respond to global influences, local expectations, and a somewhat altered set of social and infrastructural circumstances" (2000:161). Examples of such plays include Reza De Wet's *Crossing* (1994), Brett Bailey's *Ipi Zombi* (1998) and Athol Fugard's *Valley Song* (1996).

While debates continue about how best to classify or categorise South African literature, what is clear is that it continues to evolve as it deals with current subjects. What is also evident is that theatre continues to play a critical role in addressing the socio-political concerns of the present South Africa. Speaking about theatre or drama as an important tool in the period after apartheid, Olga Barrios observes that:

> theatre has been chosen as the most suitable vehicle chosen [sic] by post-apartheid playwrights to expose the sequels left by apartheid on the South African population. Thus, theatre continues to be the favourite genre to be used to raise consciousness among people as it happened through the 1970s and 1980s during the Black Consciousness Movement. (2012:39)

In the next section of this chapter, I explore some of the developments in feminist drama in Nigeria and South Africa, respectively.

Feminist Drama in Nigeria and South Africa

Africa has always been considered a fascinating spectacle by Europeans and seen as having artistic potential. While European anthropologists, historians and dramatists have written and recorded the life of the people of Africa, African writers have also responded to the image of Africa as painted by Europeans. One of the many ways in which this action-reaction process can be observed is in creative writing and especially, drama. African theatre has grown in leaps and bounds and have seen many publications such as *The Cambridge Guide to African and Caribbean Theatre* (1994) edited by Martin Banham which critiques African drama/theatre as they describe African theatre from pre-history contemporary modern theatre. *African Drama and Performance* (1999) edited by John Conteh-Morgan & Tejumola Olaniyan explores different perspectives of African drama in dramatic and literary forms and the role of African theatre in post-colonial Africa. *Modern African*

Drama (2002) edited by Biodun Jeyifo explores selected modern plays both by renowned and upcoming playwrights represented in different parts of Africa. In many of these works, African drama is addressed from the historical, cultural, political and social points of view with little or no attention to the question of gender and patriarchy. In this study however, I address this gap by focusing on the analysis African feminist dramatic traditions.

Feminist theatre became popular in the west in the 1970s in the United States; it was motivated by political theatre which "analyzed and challenged social institutions, debated political issues, and advocated social change. The goal was not merely to entertain, but to improve the quality of life in the society" (Okoh, 2012:63). According to Julianna Okoh, "feminist theatre is based on the principles of feminism and refers to any dramatic work that centers on the struggle of women for equal opportunities with men, and to be accepted as human beings, instead of being cast into gender stereotypes" (68). Okoh's perception is synchronous with Helen Chinoy's observation about women in American theatre. She observes that "women with new self-awareness and enthusiasm try to use theatre to explore what it means to be a woman, they also look back in the hope of locating themselves in some female tradition that will help them understand their problems in the present as well as plan for the future" (1996:23). In a similar vein, Sue Perlgut avows that feminist theatre tries to say: "look this is who we are and we're going to show it because nobody else will" (Perlgut, cited in Charlotte Rea, 1996:32). In the US, this form of theatre was popularised by female playwrights and dramatists such as Rosalyn Drexler, Maria Irene Fornes, Julie Bovasso, Megan Terry and Rochelle Owens who used their plays not only to give leading roles to female characters but also to address the sorts of plights women endure.

The idea that theatre could be used as an effective tool for conscientizing audiences on the topic of gender inequality also took root in other parts of the world including Africa. African women playwrights who can be regarded as feminists (although most of them reject the title), such as Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo (1942-), Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ (1929-1981) and Tess Onwueme (1955-) began exploring gender and the position of women focusing on various social and cultural norms on the continent as their subject matter in literary works. In Nigeria, while earlier Nigerian male playwrights such as Wole Soyinka and John-Pepper Clark only began to address this subject later in their careers, female writers such as Zulu Sofola, Buchi Emecheta, Tess Onwueme and Stella Oyedepo, used their works to explore patriarchy as a subject. Prior to

the emergence of these female playwrights, the literary space was dominated by male writers and the concerns of women were either not explored in their writings or were given limited attention. Suffice to say that since the days of Sofola, Emecheta, Oyedepo and Onwueme, gender-centered drama has grown and continues to grow to a worldwide recognition with the work of third generation writer, Oyedepo and Irene Salami-Agunloye leading the way. Ahmed Yerima is one of the rare male playwrights who has concentrated on exploring patriarchy and the plight of women as displayed within many traditional settings within the country. Gbemisola Adeoti describes him as

> one of the most notable dramatists to have emerged on the Nigerian literary drama stage in the last decade of the twentieth century. Apart from being a playwright, he is an artistic director, a theatre manager, a teacher and a researcher […] Yerima's dramaturgy combines the practical orientation of a theatre practitioner with the aesthetic consciousness of a critic. He draws broadly from generic elements of tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy and satire; freely experimenting, in sometimes eclectic manner, with theatrical forms known in theatre history (Adeoti 2007:3).

Osita Ezenwanebe also describes him as "the most outstanding playwright in the Nigerian theatre that centers his plays on the female question" (2009:190). She goes further to point out that "many of his works explore the cultural oppression of woman, especially widows and the less privileged women in the society" (201).

The history of South African feminist drama has followed a slightly different path in comparison to Nigeria. The influence of apartheid meant that while other writers were addressing social issues in their countries, South African writers continued to tackle the menace of apartheid through their works since freedom and racial equality were the pressing needs of that time. However, this does not suggest that some of the plays of this period left the question of gender unexplored. For instance, during the apartheid period, some of Zakes Mda's plays portray women as capable just as men and therefore deserves attention not only as women but a participant in the anti-apartheid movement. By contrast, Athol Fugard's portrayal of the character, Lena in *Boesman and Lena*, for example, places emphasis on her position as subordinate. Despite her occasional disagreement with Boesman, she still considers him the controller of their affairs. Speaking about this play and two other of Fugard's plays: *The Bloodknot* and *Hello and Goodbye* (1974), Letizia Maria Lombardozzi righly observes that the female characters are stereotyped as good woman who are "intellectually plain, suitably cowed, obedient, submissive and passive, and ascribed with a spirit

of sacrifice and self-denial, to the obvious detriment o their emotional andmental survival" (2002:17).

Since then, however, a number of writers have emerged who have tackled questions of gender, partriachy and gender abuse more directly. As one of the 'post-transitional' (Frenkel&MacKinzie), playwrights, Nadia Davids does not limit her focus to those issues within her immediate South African environment; she has extended her literary gaze to transnational topics. Her first play *At Her Feet* published in 2006 explores the cultural tenets within Islam and how these beliefs have been inimical to the rights and liberties of Muslim women both in Africa and abroad. The play also explores Islamophobia in the west. Although Davids is relatively new in the South African drama scene, as mentioned above, *At Her Feet*, as well as *Cissie Gool* (2009) and *What Remains* (2017), her most recent play, have won numerous awards. The other playwrights selected for this study, namely Fatima Dike, Thulani Mtshali and Muthal Naidoo, take a more general view of black women's oppression in post-apartheid South Africa, focusing on women's resistance to gender oppression as well as imagining more gender equal alternatives via what I term feminist utopianism – a feminist ideology which imagines or agitates for a feminist space or women alonespace which in the world that we live in, is near impracticable. Dike's *So What's New?* is set in Soweto and Mtshali's *Weemen* is set in an unnamed township; both of these plays focus on black South African women's experiences in general rather than those of a particular ethnicity or language group. Like these two plays, Naidoo's *Flight from the Mahabarath* also addresses general gender issues not only in South Africa but on a more global scale with particular emphasis on patriarchal Indian culture.

Like the work of Yerima, these plays can be regarded as examples of 'popular' theatre because they appeal to, and are about, the concerns of people who are mostly regarded as subservient, what Antonio Gramsci calls the 'subaltern classes'. This aligns with Fiebach Joachim's definition of popular theatre as "critical productions done by contemporary peasants, workers and plebeian urban strata [in order] to understand better their specific historical situation ('theatre for conscientization') or to foster the struggle for fundamental political (South African theatre under apartheid) and societal change" (1997:83). They can also be seen as popular because these plays (the South African ones) were originally performed in township settings in order to conscientize audiences about gender concerns. In a similar but not identical path, the plays considered in this

study can also be seen in this regard since they deal with the experiences of the oppressed and are performed in close proximity to those whose plights are represented in the plays.

These plays and playwrights are particularly suited for my exploration of gender concerns in the two contexts of Nigeria and South Africa because of the diverse yet interesting ways in which they address this sensitive topic. The plays also fulfil the basic tenets of feminist drama as defined by Nigerian theatre critic, Okoh. She contends that for a play or a dramatic work to be considered feminist or one which addresses the subject of gender inequality, it has to fulfil the following tenets:

> Be woman-centered, identify their problems, question gender roles and strategies, examine patriarchal traditions, question the status quo, hierarchies and power relations, challenge assumptions, and social norms, increase our knowledge, and raise consciousness, aim to improve the condition of women, talk about the experience of women in the present economic crisis and the coping strategies of women in relation to men in the household, bring about the transformation of women, aim at social transformation in the direction of greater gender equity, use innovative dramatic methods to convey central message, project invisible women playwrights. (2012:75)

As I go on to demonstrate, many of these definitions are relevant to the plays I will go on to discuss. As mentioned above, the reason I have opted for the works of a male playwright and dramatist despite many female feminist writers in Nigeria is due to the dexterity and consistency with which he engages the topic of gender, especially in his more recent works. A further reason is that men who write about women are often not given the scholarly attention they deserve since they tend to be regarded as the perpetrators of women's abuse. It seems fitting to bring Yerima's work to the fore as most of the plays he has written in the last decade address the points observed by Okoh. His interest in the experiences of women in particular can be explained in part by the life of his grandmother which is partially recorded in *Aetu.* It can also be explained in relation to the different cultures in which he was raised: he was born in the western part of the country but traveled to other parts due to the nature of his father's job as a police officer who was always transferred from one state to another. It can also be explained by virtue of the diversity within the Nigerian cultural environment. Partly because of his use of the dramatic mode, Yerima's works have received considerable attention and recognition within Nigeria but little is known of his work beyond these borders. In addition, despite the fact that Yerima has written numerous plays that engage with the

plight and treatment of women in Nigerian society, it is of great concern that very few studies focusing on the exploration of gender and patriarchy in his work have been done.

The work of Nadia Davids is relatively unknown compared to many great South African playwrights nevertheless, she has succeeded in making her mark as a contemporary African feminist playwright not only within the country but also internationally. Other than a number of reviews, interviews and the analysis of her work carried out by the playwright herself, there has been very little critical interest in the play selected for exploration in this study. Two exceptions are to be found in the work of Nicola Cloete (2011), who explores the play within Islamic and cultural perspectives and Marcia Blumberg (2011) who considers the plays within the framework of veiling. Like Yerima's and Davids' plays, the other three plays have also received very little critical attention. Even though Dike is South Africa's first black female playwright, her work has not been the subject of much academic research. However, some attention has been given to the stage performances of these plays. An article by Stephen Gray, entitled "The Theatre of Fatima Dike", for example, concentrates on the theatre more generally and on the subject of Dike herself. Although he gives brief attention to the play *So What's New?,* he does not approach it from a critical feminist perspective. Miki Flockemann (2015) also writes about Fatima Dike's work where she talks about the play's adoption of gender-role subversion and challenging of traditional cultural norms. Olga Barrios gives some attention to Mtshali's play *Weemen* as part of a broader study on gender-based violence in *Post-Apartheid Black Theatre* (2012). Other than this work, however, almost nothing else has been written on this play. To my knowledge, the only critical work on *Flight from the Mahabarath* are a couple of articles by Indian scholars who write under the names 'Naleema V' and 'Prathibha P'. Given the paucity of the literature in this field and, in particular, the absence of a gender-sensitive approach, this study offers an important and pioneering contribution, particularly with regard to the continuous debate on gender oppression and cultural values in African literature. A further literature search aimed at examining whether the works selected for this study have been compared or analyzed within the same gender inequality framework also confirms that no such work has been done.

Also important to this research are several scholarly works on Nigerian feminist literature. Ogene Mbanefo's "The Rise of Feminism in the Nigerian Novel: An Overview of Nwapa, Emecheta and Okoye" (2016), for example, gives an account of the feminist novel in Nigeria. Through an analysis

of selected texts, this study posits that African women are strong, confident and succeful as against the traditional and domestic images painted of them by some western and African gender scholars. "Reconceptualizing Gender in Nigerian Literature: The Dynamics of Womanist Ideology in Flora Nwapa's Fiction" (2006) by Akoete Amouzou endeavours to place the womanist concerns in Nwapa's novels into the context of African and Western cultures and how the women resist or react to gender hegemony. Nnaemeka Obioma (2004) "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way" and Abiola Irele's *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora* (2001), sketches the interconnections between Nigerian and South African literature especially in terms of their historical origns. However, there is much that is left unexplored. Others include, *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (1994) by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie where she explores gender and social transformation in Africa. She coined the acronym: STIWA, meaning Social Transformation Including Women of Africa. *African Wo/Man Palaver: The Nigerian Novel by Women* (1995) by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi argues that African womanism, a female resistance method which shifts from the concept of antagonism to focus on unity, compromise, consensus with the unified aim of cooperate development. These are but a few examples of studies which seek to engage with Nigerian writing from a Nigerian feminist perspective, but these writings focus mostly on earlier Nigerian female writers' works.

Chapter Outline

In the first chapter, I begin with the discussion of some of the key concepts that inform this study; gender, resistance, gender oppression. This is done via a range of feminist theories including Feminism – radical and liberal feminism, standpoint theory and Hegemonic masculinity, African Womanism, Nego-feminism and Islamic feminism. All the above gender-orientated theories emphasise the need for women's equality. Although they vary in the ways in which they navigate their ideas, especially on the continent of Africa, they all share the goal of women's emancipation and equality.

In Chapter Two, I will begin my analysis of the plays selected for discussion in this study. The first sets of plays to be analyzed are those by Nigerian writer, Ahmed Yerima. Here, I will look

specifically at *Aetu*. *Aetu* engages with the topics of girl-child marriage, polygamy and wife inheritance. *Aetu* is a contemporary play published in 2007 and set in a typical Yoruba community in colonial Nigeria. The is a play with strong characters and striking images; the major story is built around the life of a fourteen-year-old girl Aetu. Using a complex non-linear structure and the device of analepsis or 'flash back', the play explores the many ways in which traditional practices can undermine gender equality. These practices include wife inheritance (also known as levirate marriage), child-girl marriage, polygamy, and property inheritance. Western and African feminist concepts are employed to examine the feminist depiction of this play.

In Chapter Three, I unpack the play *Little Drops* which was published in 2011 as one of three plays in a compilation entitled *Three Plays* consisting of *Hard Ground*, *Little Drops* and *Ipomu*. The play is set in contemporary Nigeria in the Niger-Delta region, an area which is well-known for an on-going socio-economic crisis relating to the extraction of oil. Arguably, this crisis ranks second only to the threat of Boko Haram. My analysis of this play will highlight the play's treatment of women's experience and gender roles, looking in particular at the ways in which the play challenges patriarchal definitions of women as 'mother of the nation' and how the rights of women and people are jeopardized.

In Chapter Four, I analyze Yerima's third play, *Abobaku*. The play is set in contemporary Nigeria and engages with the broad subject of gender equality and masculinity, albeit in distinct ways. *Abobaku* is one of Yerima's most recent plays and is the latest play in a long line of gender-oriented plays. *Abobaku* was published in 2015, the same year as the death of the Ooni of Ife (the late traditional king of Ife town). This passing away of the Ooni of Ife in 2015 and the rumours that arose after the disappearance of his horseman are some of the recent historical events which inspired this play. It was rumoured in the news that the horseman or abobaku of the late Ooni of Ife had absconded from his position when he heard of the demise of the Ooni. According to Yoruba tradition, there is usually a 'man' called a king's horseman (abobaku) who enjoys almost equal affluence and influence as the king. He is usually the friend, partner and confidant of the king but his life expectancy depends on that of the king. When the king dies, the *abobaku* is supposed to commit a ritual suicide along with the king. This will enable him to continue his service to the king as he journeys to the place of the dead. In recounting these events however, Yerima approaches this recent history from a distinctly feminist angle. What is suggested in this play is that, although

some roles, duties and responsibilities are assigned only to men, women can perform these duties if accorded the same privilege.

In Chapter Five, I move on to analyse the trio of South African plays: *So What's New?* by Fatima Dike, *Weemen* by Thuli Mtshali, and *Flight from the Mahabarath* by Muthal Naidoo all of which are collected in 'Black South African Women: an Anthology of Plays' (1998) edited by Kathy Perkins. Because these three playwrights have only one play each which have been selected to be analyzed in this study and coupled with the fact that they are short plays, I have decided to group them in a single chapter. *Weemen* is set in rural post-apartheid South Africa. Many of the characters in the play are from impoverished economic and social backgrounds. The play records the brutal treatment Tsoarelo receives from her husband. Issues such as domestic abuse, psychological and physical torture and resistance to abuse are explicitly presented in *Weemen*. Dike's *So What's New* is a four-woman play emphasizing the notion that women can be creative and live well despite the various social odds that are set against them. The women depicted in the play live independently of men and thus do not experience the pressure-cum-oppression that come with having a spouse. The play tends toward the genre of comedy, As Dike puts it, what she wanted to emphasize is that "black women are funky! We can be brave" (cited in Perkins, 1998:24). This stands as a total contrast to the life of Tsoarelo in *Weemen*. As in other chapters, the focus in this section is on the play's exploration of women's strength and independence. The last play to be analyzed in the chapter is *Flight from the Mahabarath*. The play has only two male characters out of a total of twelve which immediately gives an indication of where its priorities lie. A postmodern play, *Flight from the Mahabarath* takes its idea from the popular Indian epic, *Mahabarath*. Naidoo takes issue with traditional beliefs which define the roles of women in specific ways. By doing this, the play explores an alternative to the traditional myth by giving women more freedom and a metaphorical chance to fly away from the shackles of traditions to a pos-patriarch world. The perceived and achieved benefits of fleeing from Mahabarath (tradition) to the free world of civilization will also be explored.

Chapter Six takes up the work of Nadia Davids. I have decided to devote an entire chapter to Davids' work because her play is more substantial than those of the previous South African plays. *At Her Feet* was published in 2006. The setting of the play alternates between Cape Town and Jordan and features six female characters all roles performed by an actor. The actor changes

costumes, make up, character, mood and intensity on stage depending on the character she is playing at that particular moment, thereby giving the audience a feel of Bertolt Brecht's acting style usually typified by "alienation of emotion".

The plot of *At Her Feet* is woven around the killing of a Jordanian girl which a character, Sara had witnessed on television. Azra al Jamal is stoned to death by men because she "spoke to a man who is not her father/brother/uncle/cousin" (25). This event provokes varying reactions from the other female characters in the play. The reaction of a traditional and elderly Auntie Kariema for example is totally in contrast to that of Ayesha, a self-proclaimed Afro-Marxist feminist. In this chapter, I explore the significance of these reactions in relation to contemporary feminist/womanist theorizing. In addition, I will focus on the play's exploration of the conceptions and misconceptions associated with Muslim women wearing the hijab/veil. The stigmatization that comes along with wearing the hijab by Muslim women, especially since the fatal event of the September 11, 2001 in New York is clearly explored in this play. I intend therefore to offer a critical analysis of this question as it is negotiated in the play as well as to give attention to the play's exploration of the perspective of Muslim women themselves as regards their religious practices. Finally, I will consider the play's treatment of the role of cultural/religious norms and what part they have played in suppressing women's freedom in Muslim communities.

Having analyzed each of the selected plays in terms of their negotiation of gender oppression, patriarchy and women's resistance and/or indifference, I turn in the final chapter to a comparative analysis of these plays in relation to the gender concerns they explore. Particularly important here is to draw out some of the differences and similarities in the plays' handling of gender oppression and resistance and to link this to the respective contexts in which these plays are written. Questions to be considered include the following: are there any significant differences or similarities between the kinds of gender issues that are highlighted in the Nigerian and South African plays, respectively? Are there significant similarities and differences in the forms of feminist/womanist resistance (if any) that are depicted in the Nigerians and South African plays and what kinds of alternatives are offered in each case?

From here I will move on to a consideration of these plays as forms of theory-making. In this section, I investigate to what extent these plays can be seen as offering a theory of gender and

gender oppression. Conclusions and areas of further research in the field of gender oppression and patriarchy in Africa especially Nigerian and South African feminist drama, are also suggested.

CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Debates

Various feminist theories and movements have emerged as tools for exploring, understanding and countering women's oppression but only those relevant to the particular concerns explored in the plays have been selected for this study. According to Amina Mama (in an interview conducted by Elaine Salo), western feminism "signals a refusal of oppression, and a commitment to struggling for women's liberation from all forms of oppression – internal, external, psychological and emotional, socio-economic, political and philosophical" (Salo & Mama, 2001:59). In another definition, Nicole Hammerle sees feminism as "the name given to the theory of the feminist movement and the anti-social dominance of the men's movement for equal rights for women… Feminism means in a broader sense freedom and equality, [freedom of] aspirations of women to represent their interests and rights" (1968:8). Kenneth Ruthven rightly observes that feminism and gender studies has become a "crucial determinant in the production, circulation, and consumption of literary discourse" (1984:9). According to American theorist, Susan Acker, feminist theoretical frameworks "address above all, the questions of women's subordination to men: how and why it is perpetuated, how it might be changed and (sometimes) what life would be like without it … Feminist theories serve a dual purpose, as guides to understanding gender inequality and as guides to action" (1987:421). To explore the subject of gender, oppression and sexuality, scholars have turned to studies which address these issues through discursive and theoretical paradigms. In this study, some of these theories will be employed to analyse, discuss, deconstruct and reconstruct the social and religious exemplification of gender in the selected texts. This study's main theoretical approach entails the critical reading of the selected texts from a gender perspective using various gender and feminist theories as analytical tools.

The insights of western feminism must also be set against the ideas that have emerged in a large body of gender scholarship oriented towards African contexts. According to Susan Arndt, African feminists refuse to

> [I]dentify with white western feminism, much less act under its auspices, because it concentrates solely on the question of gender , while they view gender relationships always in the context of other political, economic, cultural, and social forms and mechanisms of oppression such as racism, neocolonialism,(cultural) imperialism, capitalism, religious fundamentalism, and dictatorial and corrupt systems. (2000:711)

Chielozona Eze complicates this view:

> African feminism is largely flawed by being couched in the discourse of African anti-colonial movement. By so doing it inevitably inherited parts of the cultural setbacks of the movement … there was therefore an overabundance of reactionary impulses. African feminism or rather feminism as articulated by African women thinkers must free itself of resentment in order to focus on creating flourishing communities in Africa. (2006:97)

Arndt's and Eze's observations provide a starting point for my foray into a discussion of emergence and development of African feminist literature. The scholarship on gender in African literature is obviously too vast to cover in this study; here I point to some of the key interventions on the subject. Scholars such as Susan Arndt (2002), Obioma Nnaemeka (2004), Chielozona Eze (2006), Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju & Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju (2013), Obioma Nwokocha (2017); Akpome (2017) amongst others have contributed significantly in their quest to address the notion of African feminist theorising and its development going back to precolonial times. Arndt observes that various African feminist literatures could be broadly categorised into three: 'reformist, transformist and radical African'. Reformist feminist texts condemn individual traditional practices and modern social conventions which discriminate against women: "Men are criticized as individuals, but they can change; thus, a happy ending is made possible" (Pia Thielmann citing Arndt, 2002:117). Writing further, Thielmann notes that Arndt sees transformative texts as "[offering] a fundamental critique of patriarchy. Men's behavior is presented more sharply and as being typical for them as a group. Women's complicity in the reproduction of gender discrimination is also thematized" (117). And lastly, Arndt claims that radical feminist African texts "argue that men (as a social group) inevitably and in principle discriminate against, oppress and mistreat women" (2002:85). These are Arndt's view on African feminist texts. Eze (2006), Oloruntoba-Oju & Oloruntoba-Oju (2013) and Nwokocha (2017) offer more perspective on the historical development of African feminisms.

According to Oloruntoba-Oju & Oloruntoba-Oju, early African works mostly authored by male were phallic (or possessing a flint of challenge to patriarchy) in nature until in the early sixties when female writers began to write therefore, allowing "African feminist texts [to move] from a mere 'flint of challenge' mode to a comprehensive resistance of essentialist representations of the African female is largely associated with the emergence of African women 'subversive' literature in the early sixties" (2013:5). These writers resisted essentialist representation of African women

always painted in male-authored texts. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) are examples of such texts that challenge essentialist notion of being an African woman. The preceding generation of African feminist writers, Oloruntoba-Oju argues, seem to embrace the concept of motherhood and womanhood, and women complementarity with men. These generation Oloruntoba-Oju & Oloruntoba-Oju claim "return [to] motherhood: from confrontation to negotiation" (10). Similarly, to Oloruntoba-Ojus, Nwokocha and Akpome argue that African feminist literature of this current generation is challenging essentialist notion of womanhood and now acting more drastically. Sefi Atta, Chimamanda Adichie, Taiye Selasie, NoViolet Bulawayo are example of such modern writers who hold the future to modernist African feminist literature. Using Chimamanda's *Purple Hibiscus* (2013) as an example, both Nwokocha and Akpome in separate works argue that African feminist texts of this modern era challenges patricarchy via confrontation and subversion which are hallmarks of feminist texts of this era. In the texts such as *Efuru* (1966), *Joys of Motherhood* (1979*), Everything Good Will Come* (2005), *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), *In the Chest of a Woman* (2008), the resistance mechanisms of the opperessed women is strongly used to factorise what form of texts they are. For the future, Nwokocha argues that "rebellion is the main future of the modern Nigerian women's narratives" (2017:2). Although the development can be traced in some text within Africa, we still find many of them seeming admonishing for the essentialist African womanhood. In this study, resistance is given a good attention as it goes a long way to explaining what sort of feminist stand the selected plays take. In the texts that I analyse in this study, they all seem to be what I call African modernist feminist texts, albeit with some varying levels of differences. While I agree with such development of African feminist literature highlighted above, I also observe that these are not always straight-jacketed as it shall be seen in the texts that I examine in this study.

In order to explore the concerns and preoccupations of these plays, selected feminist or gender analytical frameworks are employed. As indicated in my introduction, my aim is to bring these different theoretical traditions into dialogue. To this end, I draw on three main critical perspectives, namely, selected strands of Western feminism, versions of Afrocentric feminism, namely, African Womanism and Nego-feminism as well as Islamic feminism. The latter movements can be classified as offshoots of postcolonial or transnational feminism, one which seeks to place western and Afrocentric theories in the same critical conceptual frame. The earlier – western feminism

seem to address the subject of gender inequality with arguably, more central concerns of western middle-class women. Again, as mentioned earlier, these concepts would also be considered in similar vein as Nnaemeka's contention that western and Afro-centric feminist theories should embrace "the possibilities, desirability, and pertinence of a space clearing that allows a multiplicity of different but related frameworks from different locations to touch, intersect, and feed off of each other in a way that accommodates different realities and histories" (2004:362-363).

Western/African feminism: A Brief Overview

Western feminism as a movement started in the late eighteenth century. It was largely referred to as the women's movement and not called feminism in its early stages. Betty Friedman notes the following:

> Feminist politics originated where capitalism, industrial growth, democratic theory and socialist critiques converged, as they did in Europe and North America in 1800. Women and their male allies began to agitate for equal educational, economic, and political opportunities, a struggle that continues to the present. (2002:2)

This initial clamour for women's suffrage later led to what gender scholars call second wave feminism. Second wave feminism places emphasis on social and domestic equality, as well as the reproductive rights of women and the right to control their bodies. Publications such as Betty Friedman's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), *Sexual Politics* (1969) by Kate Miller, *The Subjugation of Women* (1970) by Juliet Mitchell and *The Dialetic of Sex: The Case of Feminist Revolution* (1970) by Shulamith Firestone are some of the more noteworthy books that deal with the themes of this wave of feminism. Second wave feminism has subsequently come under attack for its essentialist understanding of gender, its privileging of white middle-class female experience and its insensitivity to racial, class and cultural complexities. Third wave feminism sought to address these criticisms. Rebecca Walker, daughter of American womanist, Alice Walker stresses that this movement seeks to face and embrace the various contradictions and complexities in the lives of women (Walker, 1995b). In 1995, Walker published *Becoming the Third Wave: Ms*, where she made arguably the most common third wave feminist statement, "I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave". Third wave feminism was able to lure or attract a younger generation of women as it became more open and accessible to this set of young females because

it was able to relate to a "media-savvy, culture-driven generation of young women" (Baumgardner & Richards 2000:77).

Within western feminism, among the theories that will be engaged as this study progresses are liberal and radical feminisms. In plays such as *Aetu* and *Little Drops*, the ideals of liberal feminism is used to examine some of the resistance mechanisms adopted in the plays. While in plays such as *So What's New?, Weemen* and *Flight from the Mahabarath*, radical feminism is explored for the same purpose. As the name implies, liberal feminism argues for an equal platform for both genders to operate. They argue that neither man nor woman should be given a superior place in society. In a simpler form, liberal feminism argues for an equal playing field. Radical feminism, another feminist theory of the twentieth century, sees feminist struggle in a more radical manner. These feminists believe that gender struggle should take a more practical form and that patriarchy should be eliminated from every sector of the society. Although there are various strands to radical feminism, the most conspicuous is the argument that the very presence of men in the society ensures that there will be gender oppression; therefore, men – which can also be a synecdoche for patriarchy, should be completely eradicated from the society. According to Freidman et al. radical feminists "react with anger towards individual men, who they see as embodying the patriarchal power relations of the system as a whole. They argue that radical feminists believe that, "to get rid of patriarchy, [they] must kill all men" (1987:9). Radical feminists sometimes want a space free of men: women-only business, women-only sexuality, women-only bars and women-only politics. This they argue will allow them take control of their own lives.

Two further theories originating from the West will be important for this thesis: these are the concepts of 'standpoint theory' and 'hegemonic masculinity'. These theories have been selected for their relevance to the play texts selected. Writing about standpoint theory, an idea she took from feminist theorist, Sandra Harding, Dorothy Smith (2005) stresses that there is a big difference between the point where one stands and the point where other stands which might be formed by various individual orientations such as family, religious, sexual or gender. This theory acknowledges that the standpoint of men is steadily privileged over that of women. She emphasises the need to acknowledge and evaluate the standpoint of women whose viewpoints are often devalued or unrecognized in male-oriented societies. Smith provides the following elaboration:

> Standpoint theory stresses that there is a big difference between the point where one stands and the point where another stands which generally might be formed by various individual orientations e.g. family, religious, sexual or gender orientation. This theory acknowledges that no individual has complete, objective knowledge, that no two people have exactly the same standpoint and that We should not take the standpoint from which we speak for granted. (Smith, 2005:10)

What Smith explores here is a post-structuralist stand where the position or view or perceiver of an ideology determines the meaning and not the sender of the message. This means that the position or point of view of a man who is a patriarchal entity is not the same as the woman who sees it from her own experience of it. American feminist scholar Julia Wood observes that "feminist standpoint theory begins with the assumption that the society is structured by power relations that generate unequal social relations; one location is occupied by members of the dominant group, and other locations are inhabited by members of the subordinate groups" (2009:397). Wood's observation gives another perspective to the discussion on the topic. In her view, the world seems bifurcated into two spheres or "locations" occupied in the first place by member of the superior group (mostly male) who often rule, dictate and control the activities of those (mostly female) who inhabit the other part of the world. Wood notes that "women's lives, in general, differ systematically and structurally from men's lives" (397).

Another important feminist theory in this study is Raewyn Connell's notion of hegemonic masculinity. Gender inequalities are embedded in the multidimensional structures of relationship between women and men. As the modern sociology of gender shows, these relationships operate at different levels of human experiences, from economic arrangements, cultural practices, and the state to interpersonal relationships and individual emotions (Holter 1997; Walby 1997; Connell 2002). As a sociologist and historian, Connell takes her cue from Antonio Gramsci, Italian journalist, communist and political activist (1891-1937) who first used the phrase "cultural hegemony" to describe how the ruling class maintains its dominance not primarily through force or coercion, but rather through the willing, spontaneous consent of the ruled. Using Marx's notion that the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class, Gramsci coined the term cultural hegemony. Focusing in particular on how the ideas of the Catholic Church ruled and dominated Italy of that time, he referred to this willful acceptance of dominance as cultural hegemony. According to Connell and James Messerschmidt, "hegemonic masculinity refers to the pattern of practices that allow men's dominance over women to continue" (2005:823). These practices can be religious,

familial, cultural, institutional and societal. Connell and Messerschmidt posit that, "cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization and the marginalization or deligitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities" (2005:846). These forms of masculinities as presented in the texts will be explored alongside Connell's theory. It must be noted that the theories mentioned above originated from the global north, were frontlined by middle class western women and speak to or address the concerns of women in these parts of the world. However, due to the differences in the ways gender inequality is experienced in different part of the world, particularly in non-western countries, it is imperative to explore these plays using the interpretive lens of Afrocentric feminist ideologies. This is because these theories speak more to the needs of African women specifically.

Many Africans feminists/womanists perceive western feminism to be 'anti-men' which is considered unacceptable within many African cultural environments. This sentiment was echoed by Nigerian Buchi Emecheta in a 1989 interview when she refused to be labeled feminist: "I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that … I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism" (1989:19). In a similar tone, another South African female writer, Gcina Hlope in a 1996 interview with Rolf Solberg and Malcolm Heskey argued that feminism "is a term that came to Africa from other countries. African women have a different kind of feminism" (1996:31). Another African woman writer who dissociates herself from Western feminism is Tsitsi Dangarembga from Zimbabwe. In an interview with Flora Veit-Wild she argues that, "the white Western feminism does not meet my experiences at a certain point, the issues of me as a black woman. The black American female writers touch more of me than the white ones" (1989:106). This point is also corroborated by Chioma Steady:

> African patterns of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not 'the other' but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own. (1987:8)

In a similar vein, Obioma Nnaemeka, a Nigerian nego-feminist whose views will be explored during the process of this study posits that:

> To meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the African environment that one must refer. African feminism is

> not reactive; it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance. (1998:9)

African feminist scholars such as Nnaemeka believe that the experience of women's oppression on the continent of Africa is different from that of western women. To try to differentiate these feminist concepts, Nnaemeka declares that "the language of feminist engagement in Africa (collaborate, negotiate, compromise) runs counter to the language of western feminist scholarship and engagement (challenging, disrupt, deconstruct, blow apart, etc.)" (2003:380). She goes further to cite American philosopher, Amy Allen who states emphatically that "feminists are interested in criticizing, challenging, subverting, and ultimately overturning the multiple axes of stratification affecting women" (1992:2) as examples of western feminist ideals which to Nnaemeka, are un-African. Aduke Adebayo gives a concise summary of what is meant by Afrocentric feminism as against western feminism:

> Is not only about defining the negative experiences of women. It is about the unique positive experiences of African women; for to be an African woman is, and can be a beautiful experience at home, at work, and in the wider society. It is bad feminism, an undesirable discourse that which insists solely on African women's victimization and their helplessness at the hands of their men. It is also a stigmatized and narcissist feminism which cannot see beyond itself and project into a larger of the society. (1996:5)

This is similar to post-colonial feminist scholar Chandra Mohanty's assertion that the representative image of the "third world woman as always and everywhere oppressed is what sustains the illusion of 'first world' women's autonomy: the assumption that they are secular, liberated, and hav[e] control over their own lives" (1984: 353). Claire Chambers and Susan Watkins (2012) concur, noting that the subject of women can no longer be categorised as "unchanging, existing in a transhistorical state of othered oppression, patiently awaiting the intervention of feminists who have themselves somehow escaped this position" (298). From the assertions above, these scholars challenge western essentialist definition of the experience of women, therefore arguing for an ideology which addresses the challenges, needs and experiences of these black women. Among many theories reacting to western feminism is womanism.

Womanism was first used by African American scholar, Alice Walker in 1982 when she attempted to peculiarise the concerns of African-American woman as different from the working class white American woman. In this theory, Alice notes that the plight of the black woman is not identical

with that of the white woman, but that African-American women are aware that black men are also subject of oppression:

> Womanist is to feminist as purple is to Lavender. A black feminist or feminist of colour. A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility … and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male or female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally Universalist …. (1984: xi-xii)

This assertion encompasses various aspects of the experiences of women of colour. Its acknowledgement of cultural uniqueness, and its interest in understanding that black men as oppressed the same way black women are.

However, Walker's womanism was not completely embraced by some sections of African gender scholars. Among them is Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi. Ogunyemi came up with another womanist concept in order to correct the misconception that the idea of wominism that Walker proposes. She claims that: "it is necessary to reiterate that the womanist praxis in Africa has never totally identified with all the original Walkerian concepts. An important point of departure is the African obsession to have children" (1996:133). According to her, African womanism is a

> philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structure that subjugates blacks. A womanist will recognise that along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations into her philosophy. An 'African womanist' she says will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations into her philosophy. (1985:64)

To Ogunyemi, African womanists should consider factors that are specifically African when theorizing feminism. These factors include "interethnic skirmishes and cleansing … religious fundamentalism … the language issue, gerontocracy and in-lawism" (1997:4) which tend to be absent in western feminist theorising. Ogunyemi's effort to establish some aspects of African woman's life that are almost alien to western woman makes her proposition all the more meaningful. Writing further about this theory in 1988, she adds that African womanism is "black centered; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of woman like

feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand" (1988:65).

While interviewing Ogunyemi in 2000, German literary scholar, Susan Arndt also notes that "the core of Ogunyemi's definition of African womanism is the conviction that the gender questions can be dealt with only in the context of other issues that are relevant to African women" (712). It is in this same interview that Ogunyemi declares that:

> When I was thinking about womanism, I was thinking about areas that are relevant for Africans but not for blacks in America – issues like extreme poverty, and in-law problems, older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives, or men oppressing their wives. Religious fundamentalism is another African problem that is not relevant to African Americans – Islam, some Christian denominations, and also African traditional religions. These are problems that my mind has to cover from an African–womanist perspective. We cannot take the African-American situation and its own peculiarities and impose it on Africa, particularly as Africa is so big and culturally diverse. So, I thought it was necessary to develop a theory to accommodate these differences. (Ogunyemi in Arndt, 2000: 714-715)

In similar fashion, Nigerian gender scholar Ebun Kolawole opines that an African womanist is "any African woman who has the consciousness to situate the struggle within African cultural realities by working for a total and robust self-retrieval of the African woman is an African or African womanist" (1997:34). The above attestations buttress the understanding of African womanism as "polyphonic, optimistic, powerful, and inspiring" (Ardnt, 2000:725), and different from both white or western feminism and Walker's womanism. It also buttresses Rodriguez's stance that African womanism is informed by the "interaction of Afrocentric, multicultural, and feminist theoretical interpretations of political, economic, historical, social, and cultural" subjects (1996:4).

Another body of work that I will be drawing on is Obioma Nnaemaka's Nego-feminism. This theory simply means 'no ego feminism or negotiation feminism'. To Nnaemeka, "nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second, nego-feminism stands for "no ego" feminism … Nego-feminism is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies" (2004:378). Nego-feminism, or Negotiation feminism as it is sometimes called, allows for negotiation and discussion between both genders. It is basically built around dialogue and

mutual understanding. Rather than create and follow a dogmatic or confrontational approach to eradicating patriarchy, Nnaemeka believes that African women know how to find their way around gender oppression. She claims that nego-feminism

> Challenges [patriarchy] through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework (378).

Diction such as "negotiation", "compromise" and "go around" connotes a strategic approach to dealing with women's oppression. Interestingly, Nnaemeka uses the metaphor of landmines to describe gender oppression in Africa thus making the point that it can be explosive (and dangerous) if not handled carefully. This is the essence of nego-feminism. Women have to be careful with the way they handle gender oppression so as not to aggravate it. The problem with this ideology is the a *priori* position in which women naturally find themselves. Why do they find themselves walking amidst landmines? Why do men have to be landmines? Nego-feminism seem to be managing patriarchy rather than tackling it. The questions that follows this are, for how long would they continue to negotiate and manage the problem? At what point would they tackle the entity responsible for setting up the metaphorical explosive? The questions above suggest that nego-feminism seem to create more questions than answer.

Consequently, from the foregoing exploration of African feminism which incorporates inclusivity, understanding and celebration of the uniqueness of African culture, some of the selected plays in this study would be deciphered. Other African gender theories which seek to address some of the omissions and blind spots of Western feminist theory include Omolara Ogundipe- Leslie's STIWA-nism (1994), Catherine Obianuju Acholonu's motherism (1995) and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's 'snail-sense feminism' (2015). As suggested earlier, the present study tends to focus more closely on the two African feminist theories explained above.

The final critical paradigm I draw on in this study is Islamic feminism or Muslim feminism, a theoretical framework which became popular in the late 20th century. Iranian-American, Nayereh Tohidi defines Islamic feminism as a

> negotiation with modernity, accepting modernity (which emerged first in the West) yet presenting an "alternative" that is to look distinct and different from the West, Western modernism, and Western feminism. This is an attempt to 'nativize' or legitimize feminist demands in order to avoid being cast as a Western import. (2003:139)

She goes further to claim that:

> To educated women who want to reconcile the religious dimension of their identity with an empowered social status based on egalitarian gender relationships and freedom of choice in their personal, family, and socio-political life, Muslim feminism offers a mechanism to resist and challenge the sexist nature of the ongoing identity politics, particularly Islamism. (139)

For Margot Badran as a historian, Islamic feminism is a "feminist discourse and practice grounded in an Islamic paradigm" (2002:11). Citing Badran, Barlan defined Islamic feminism as a "discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks the practice rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum" (cited in Barlan, 2004:1). In her contribution to Muslim or Islamic feminism, South African gender scholar, Aiasha Dadi Patel observes that "Muslim feminism … is a form of intersectional feminism [which] operates within the framework of religious constraints. It acknowledges that Muslim women have rights afforded to them by their religion, and supports their advocacy for justice and fulfilment of their rights against oppressive cultural and patriarchal dilutions of the faith" (2018:93). These theories will be used to analyse these plays depending on the ideas emanating from the plays.

CHAPTER TWO: "WHAT KIND OF A LIFE IS THIS?" GENDER AND PATRIARCHY IN AHMED YERIMA'S *AETU*

Yerima is a versatile playwright who engages with a wide range of themes and issues. His exploration of the Yoruba cultural traditions is both sensitive and circumspect and he is careful to avoid a nostalgic or romanticizing perspective. It is his handling of mythical, cultural and socio-political themes that has made him one of the most highly regarded writers on the contemporary Nigerian literary scene. Yerima's plays have toured in many different parts of Nigeria and have won awards such as the 2006 NLNG Prize for Literature and the ANA/NNDC J.P. Clark prize for drama. On the academic front, they have also been the subject of several scholarly studies including two Festschrifts: *Making Images, Remaking Life: Art and Life in Ahmed Yerima (2007)* edited by Uwemedimo Atakpo and Inegbe Stephens and *Muse and Mimesis: Critical Perspectives on Ahmed Yerima's Drama (2007)* edited by Gbemisola Adeoti where several facets of his writings are addressed. In these works, authors write on Yerima's plays exploring them from different perspectives ranging from cultural, traditional, historical to the contemporary. Subjects like destiny, sacrifice, heroism, literary generation, contemporary politics and so on and so forth are explored in these works. Some recent works have been able to look at gender in his works. What my study aims to contribute to this ongoing exploration of Yerima's work is the gendered aspect of it. How these works depict gender, what they depict and how these depictions can be explored in relation to feminist and womanist ideologies. Not stopping there, my study looks at how these works along with selected South African plays could be offering gender theories in themselves. This means that, after exploring the plays through western and African gender theories, I look at these plays as offering theories in themselves. This is the position where my work becomes timely and relevant.

Like many of his other plays, *Aetu* explores the social and personal impact of various traditional norms within the culture of the Yoruba people. Central to his concerns as a writer are the questions of gender and patriarchy and the effects of these preoccupations on its victims. Although his entry into the Nigerian writing scene occurred much later than authors such as Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Tess Onwueme and Molara Ogundipe – who also explore the specific forms of gender discrimination which arise in the context of traditional and cultural practices – he stands out as one

of the very few male writers to give sustained and concentrated attention to these issues. In this chapter, I look at the Yoruba cultural milieu, how gender equality or lack of it is understood, cultural and religious practices that the play comments on, the position of the play, and explicit and implicit recommendations of the play. In this section, I argue that the play's treatment of gender and feminism goes beyond the often more embraced African womanist theories of gender in African feminist texts, but also aligns with some ideologies situated in western feminist concepts.

Part of the contextualization is to look at scholarly debates on the question of gender, women's rights and gender oppression in precolonial Yoruba society. The Yoruba people migrated from a region in the present Middle East between 600BC and 100 AD and settled in the western part of what is now known as 'Nigeria', a name which was coined by Flora Shaw, wife of former Nigerian colonial administrator, Lord Lugard (*http://www.africa.uga.edu/yoruba/yorubapeople.html*). Between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries, various wars engulfed different Yoruba states and caused power to be shifted from one kingdom to the other. However, Ile-Ife remained the sacred home and place of origin of the Yoruba people. Over the past decades, Yoruba artistry, philosophy, religion and cultural practices have been the subject of much scholarly research. Leo Frobenius, an eighteenth-century German ethnologist and archaeologist was the first to call scholarly attention to the world of ancient Ile-Ife art which he described using a Eurocentric perspective as "traces of a Greek colony on the Atlantic coast of Africa" (cited in Olupona, 1993: 242). Aside from being of interest to scholars of history, the cultural achievements of the Yoruba people have also provided inspiration for fictional and other creative engagements.

An appreciation for the cultural and philosophical achievements of the Yoruba people should not blind us to some of its hostile and oppressive characteristics which include different forms of discrimination and oppressions. Philosopher, Oladele Abiodun Balogun argues that the oppression of women in particular "is fostered in Africa, in fact globally, by cultural vehicles" (2010:22). The same is true in the Yoruba context where traditional cultural practices are one of the main vehicles through which women are disempowered, marginalized and oppressed. This perspective has been refuted by critics such as John Segun Odeyemi (2013) and Oyeronke Oyewumi (2013) who debunk the claim that traditional Yoruba culture – especially pre-colonial traditions - are oppressive to women. According to Odeyemi, Yoruba culture does not place women on a lower pedestal in

relation to men: rather "Yoruba men have a keen sense of protecting their women and providing for them". Going further, Odeyemi insists that Yoruba culture "does not discriminate against women participating in decision making within the home and the political or public sphere" (2013:4-5). Odeyemi's argument also points to pre-colonial period in relation to gender inequality. He argues that "prior to the slave trade, colonialism and missionary incursion into Yorubaland; women enjoyed a great role with equal privileges as their male counterparts" (2013:2). In addition, in an earlier publication, Oyewumi (1997) claims that gender was and still is not a fundamental mode of classifying humans and that is especially the case in the Oyo region of Nigeria, a region which is densely populated by Yoruba people and where Yoruba culture is practiced almost unreservedly. Oyewumi supports her argument by pointing to the way in which *Obinrin* (woman) and *Okunrin* (man) are defined in Yoruba cosmology:

> Obinrin does not derive etymologically from okunrin, as 'wo-man' does from 'man'. *Rin*, the common suffix of okunrin and obinrin, suggests a common humanity; the prefixes obin and okun specify which variety of anatomy. There is no conception here of an original human type against which the other variety had to be measured. Eniyan is the non-gender-specific word for humans. (Oyewumi, 1997:33)

Oyewumi suggests that in the Yoruba world, *okunrin* and *obinrin* have always been seen and treated as equal as they are born *eniyan* (human). This claim reflects the view of *Eledumare* (God of creation). Oyewumi asserts that the idea of superiority only arises when one *eniyan*, either male or female, is older than the other.

Oyewumi's claims have not been accepted universally even by Yoruba historical and cultural scholars. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, a gender scholar, takes issue with Oyewumi's analysis of the *okunrin/obinrin* ideology. According to him, Oyewumi "is wrong to conclude that seniority is the only form of power relationship, that power operates outside of or in relation to other forms of hierarchy" (5). Bakare-Yusuf's perspective is shared by many gender equality proponents in the country. As Oyewumi has argued, sociologist, Adekunle Aderinto for example, argues that it is incontestable that Yoruba culture is hierarchical, a hierarchy which is based on age as well as gender and other factors. Using patrilineality within the Yoruba culture, Aderinto notes that, in the case of property inheritance, "traditionally, females are not expected to inherit property from their parents since they are themselves, 'property' to whom they are eventually married" (1999:107). In similar vein, Yetunde Aluko explains that "under Yoruba custom and culture, women can inherit

from their parents, brothers, or sisters; but often not from their husbands – because women have ownership and inheritance rights under statutory law but these rights do not hold under customary law" (2015:57). This supremacy is extended to the marriage institution where, traditionally, a man can marry more than one wife, but it is forbidden for a woman to do so. These and many other examples suggest that a patrilineal Yoruba culture places little emphasis on women's rights. Upon reflecting on these arguments, one is tempted to question Oyewumi's conclusion that both genders are equal within Yoruba tradition. Beside the fact that hegemonic power is granted to men (in the form of inheritance and marriage rights), there are other forms of socio-legal discrimination pertaining to land ownership and control and the ownership of children, all of which cede authority to men.

Yerima's plays can be considered an important intervention in this ongoing and spirited debate and thus can be perceived as offering a theory of gendered discrimination in their own right. In addition to the play's concerns with oppressive gender practices such as child marriage and wife inheritance, *Aetu* which this chapter explores also gives attention to other forms of gender marginalization such as property inheritance, wife accusation and male child preference. Although these practices have become less common in recent years, they are still observed in some very traditional Yoruba communities. In an interview with Rantimi Julius-Adeoye, Yerima observes that the society he lives in does not give women heroic status and he therefore finds it puzzling when men ask for women's independence yet, at the same time make it difficult for this to be achieved:

> The female hero for [him] is a contradiction within the Nigerian reality. It's a contradiction in the sense that the 'modern' you and I want the woman to be independent, we want the woman to be powerful, to be educated and yet we have created traditional stumbling blocks on her path. The more we empower her, the more another stumbling block will bring her down (Yerima in Julius-Adeoye, 2013: 225).

In this, he suggests that it is almost unrealistic to write a work of fiction in which women are not depicted as subjugated in one form or another because, in reality, the society does not offer the space for women's emancipation. This does not suggest that Yerima is 'anti-tradition'. Firmly located within a modern sensibility, the playwright gives value to traditional practices while at the same time pointing to their gender oppressive aspects. As I go on to argue, Yerima makes categorical statements by highlighting the impact of gender oppression on ordinary women and by

using the Old Woman character to state that the men in the play "must stop the act which forces a human spirit against … her own will" (54).

Performing/Theorising Gender in *Aetu*

As many scholars have argued, literature can be a powerful tool in the education and humanization of society. Nigerian scholar Bukoye Arowolo notes that literature "serves as a ready antidote to the deterioration of cherished human and traditional values, as means of maintaining moral and good interpersonal relationships" (1995:127). While Arowolo's assertion emphasises the humanistic and therapeutic role of literature in society, Wole Soyinka points to another function of literary expression by claiming that the "duty of the playwright is to act as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice in his time" (1968:21). Reflecting on the ways in which Nigerian playwrights have taken up Soyinka's and Arowolo's ideas, theatre critic Osita Ezenwanebe makes the following observation: "Nigerian theatre is therefore deeply committed to issues of immediate social relevance – from issues of cultural contamination and degradation to those of moral and social decadence including the inhuman oppression of one class by another" (2006:2). Yerima's plays which document an oppressive social reality as a means of inspiring change can be seen to fit neatly into this socially conscious aesthetic.

While critics have applauded both his insight and his writing skill, many remain divided on the question of categorization, specifically whether he should be categorised as a 'second' or 'third generation' Nigerian writer. Yerima embarked on his career in the mid-1980s publishing about a dozen plays including the historical plays, *The Trials of Oba Ovonramwen* (1998) and *Attahiru* (1999). However, the bulk of his plays were published in the new millennium. More than two-thirds of these plays deal with the issue of gender inequality, patriarchy, and women's empowerment. This means that, intellectually and ideologically, the issues that he explores are very similar to those explored by the second-generation writers. This is confirmed by Rasheed Abiodun Musa who argues that even though he is frequently classified as a third-generation writer, Yerima "belongs to the second generation of intellectuals" (2003:212). (See Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton, 2005; Taye Awoyemi-Arayela, 2013).

Yerima's plays tend to be polemical and issue-driven. However, in contrast to more hard-hitting writers like Wole Soyinka, he uses a subtler approach, often drawing on the techniques of satire to critique socio-cultural and political concerns. His plays explore a diverse range of social questions by engaging with a variety of perspectives including Marxism, socialism, traditionalism, and feminism. According to Julius-Adeoye, Yerima's "works present him as a fearless, twenty-first century socio-political realist dramatist who is not afraid of whose horse is gored" (2013:194). Even when he was working in the corridors of political power as the Artistic Director of National the Troupe of Nigeria (2000-2006) and Director-General of the National Troupe and National Theatre of Nigeria, he risked his job because of his ongoing public criticism of government policy, evident in plays such as *The Lottery Ticket* (2002) and *Kaffir's Last Game* (1998). Since the turn of the millennium, the bulk of his plays have focused on women's experience of patriarchy as expressed in different Nigerian traditions with a more central focus on the Yoruba context. Yerima is one of the few male playwrights in the country whose work offers a critique of women's oppression, and the ways in which this is affected by culture, religion and politics.

As discussed in the Introduction, African theorizing about gender has been dominated by Nigerian cultural critics. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Obioma Nnaemeka and Molara Ogundipe are some of the more prominent names in the field. It is likely therefore that Yerima's plays, to some extent, represents an engagement with these ideas. While Yerima has written many thought-provoking plays on the question of gender, he has yet to be popularly recognized as a feminist of high caliber within the country. One would be tempted to assume that this is chiefly because of his gender.

Aetu was published in 2007 by Kraft Book Limited, a publishing house which has published almost all of Yerima's plays and those of famous authors like Niyi Osundare, Dapo Adelugba, Olu Obafemi, Femi Osafisan and others. As at this study, no record of performance of this play could be found despite research, however, this does not suggest that the play has not been performed before. It means that the performance record is unavailable, which is also the case for many other plays, just as in many other plays, even by some renowned playwrights. Due to this lack of record of performance, there is no indication of how the performance of the play was received by the public. As suggested above, a major preoccupation of *Aetu* is patriarchy and gender subjugation, with specific reference to the way in which these are manifested within the cultural norms and practices of the Yoruba people of Nigeria, and the resistance strategy adopted by the protagonist

and other characters in the play. Set in pre-colonial Nigeria, *Aetu* depicts the traditional cultural practices of the Yoruba people and the various actions and reactions of the characters involved. The playwright does this by recreating the experiences of his paternal grandmother Ayeshetu, a history which he brings into the present as a way of commenting on contemporary issues and showing how they have their roots in the past, an idea which contrasts Oyewumi's earlier comment. In this regard, while the play can be understood in aesthetic terms as a dramatic exploration of character and place, it is equally possible to read it as sociological record, one which presents detailed insights into some of the nuances of traditional Yoruba culture. In the section which follows, I take up an enquiry into the specific ways in which the play engages with forms of gender oppression which are culturally-sanctioned.

Aetu begins at the shrine of *Esu* (the Yoruba trickster god) where Kande, a man in his thirties and a lawyer by profession, has brought his extremely ill father, Obajimi (70). Kande is the grandson of Aetu, the play's eponymous protagonist. Saura, the Abesu (the chief priest of the *Esu* god) as he is alternately called in the play, attends to Obajimi. Through divination, Saura discovers that Obajimi's sickness, and those of his brothers who are now dead, is a result of a spell which was cast on them by Kande's grandmother Aetu. Saura, the *Esu* priest and Kande, the grandson of Aetu decide to go to Aetu's tomb where they will make sacrifices and attempt to communicate with the deceased. Upon their arrival, they are stopped by an old woman who claims to be the 'watchman' of the graveyard. Because of their desperation and trepidation, they appeal to the old woman for leniency in other for them to carry out their atonement. They describe the events that have brought them there. Old Woman who has been guarding the tomb for over seventy years reveals to them the kind of life that Aetu lived, what caused her death, and why it is irrelevant to make the sacrifice. She begins a story of the terrible events that led to Aetu's spell or curse which was intended not only to plague herself but also her children and her grandchildren to the fourth generation.

This takes the reader to the first analepsis of the play where a fourteen-year-old Aetu, heavily pregnant, visits Saura at the shrine. She enunciates to Saura, the priest of *Esu*, that she has come to the shrine to perform a curse upon her offenders and her would-be-offenders. She recounts how she had been raped and subsequently forced to marry her rapist Oke, at the age of fourteen. Saura advises her to "handle matters with more caution … caution is all I ask. Woman, think of your unborn child" (19) but Aetu responds with anger: "Step aside, Priest. You waste the time of my

god" (19). Saura then leaves her to do as she wishes. After casting the spell, Saura again gives her an opportunity to reverse the spell as he offers her *omi idi Esu*, (the water from the shrine of *Esu*) which if Aetu drinks it, will nullify the potency of the curse, an offer which she thoughtlessly rejects.

After this story, the play returns to the graveside where Old Woman continues to take her listeners back to the traumatic events of her life. A second analepsis enacts the actual killing of Atiba, Aetu's young lover, by Oke's men at his order. This is followed by the dramatic enactment of Aetu's removal to Oke's house where she is subsequently raped. The difference between these analepses is that one entails Aetu's re-telling of her ordeal to Saura while the second analepsis presents the actual events, namely the killing of her lover and Aetu's subsequent abduction and rape. The novel thus employs a disrupted and non-linear dramatic structure: not only does the play shift from the present to the past but the historical events themselves are presented in reversed and achronological order. He adopts this technique throughout the play. As a result of the spell that Aetu casts at the shrine eight months after her rape and forced marriage to her first husband, Oke, any man who has a sexual intercourse with her will die. As stipulated by the curse, Oke dies just less than a year after Aetu becomes his wife. Aetu is then immediately made over to her late husband's brother without her consent or approval. Because her refusal will be futile, she agrees reluctantly to the marriage. The story then returns to the graveyard. Again, because of her curse, Aetu's second husband dies also. In this way, 'Old Woman' leads the audience to Aetu's third marriage which is also presented in the form of an analepsis. The penultimate scene tells of Aetu's third travail. She delivers a boy for the third time and for the third husband who also is brother to her previous two. This third marriage leads eventually to her suicide as she can no longer bear the pain and shame of her ordeal. In the final scene of the play, the extremely ill Obajimi – descendant of Aetu and partaker of the curse, also dies because of the potency of the curse. The play resolves with the discovery that 'Old Woman' is Aetu's wandering soul. Because she had refused to take the water from the shrine which Saura had offered her, her soul continues to roam the world and could not find rest. After the final encounter with her Saura, she takes the water and she dies and her soul finally goes to the place of the ancestors.

As indicated above, *Aetu* employs a complex temporal structure in which the sequential unfolding of events in the present is periodically interrupted by scenes and encounters from a traumatic past.

Through the literary technique of analepsis, the chronological sequence of events is distorted, thus enabling the simultaneous performance of events from the past and the present. In incorporating different temporal moments in its narration, the play underscores an understanding of time not as sequential (as in conventional historiography) but as multiple, consisting of different lived human experiences. This narrative style corroborates Victoria Browne's argument about the historical representation of feminism and women's experience. She argues that the linear method of history telling "begets a closed-minded attitude toward the past, preventing us from grasping the unfinished possibilities of feminisms from earlier times" (2014:1). In this way, she argues that history, particularly feminist history which represents the experiences of women, is best understood as non-linear, consisting of different spatio-temporal paradigms rather than the "straightforward past–present–future chronology" (2). In the same vein, Leela Fernandes posits that "feminist thought … requires a conception … that can contain both the insights of the past and the potential breakthroughs of the future within the messy, unresolved contestations of political and intellectual practice in the present" (2010: 114). In addition to the use and disruption of linear time, the play also invokes cyclical time. Where the play engages linear time in the telling of the events of Aetu's life and eventual death, the play also invokes cyclical time through the story of Aetu's death and reincarnation. In this way, the play invokes two different ideas of time – the traditional and the modern. This strategy suggests that both time periods have equal value within the cosmology of the play and the culture from which the play originates. The temporal scope of the play falls between 80 and 90 years. Aetu is fourteen when she is raped, gets married to her first husband at the same age, subsequently marries two other men for whom she also has children. She then dies at the birth of her third child. Roaming the earth as a result of her refusal to drink the *omi idi Esu*, Aetu spends another seventy years as a ghost. Yerima's exploration of analepsis, linear and cyclical time, as well as his use of disrupted or non-linear chronology aligns his play's with Browne's and Fernandez's argument about the non-linearity of women's experience.

Many of the central events in the play and those with the most cultural resonance take place at sacred locations or 'spiritual grounds'. In Yoruba belief, spaces such as the shrine and the graveyard are profoundly associated with spirituality and mysticism. The shrine is a place where worshippers visit to consult the gods through the office of the priest that is allied with a particular god, they make their requests known and receive messages from the gods. That is why, in the play,

Aetu goes to the shrine of *Esu* to tender her request and to cast her spells on her victims. Her selection of this sacrosanct arena suggests how much she reveres *Esu* and how seriously she considers her request and intentions. The other key locale in the play is the graveyard, a space which shares similar spiritual and mystical associations as the shrine. Specifically, the graveyard represents the place of habitation of the ancestral being. The living sometimes visits the tombs of their ancestors to make requests, prayers or intercessions. It is no surprise that Yerima engages these locales when it comes to the key dramatic moments of the play: it is at the shrine that Aetu makes the greatest decision of her life (to cast a spell); it is the same place she makes the most profound statement about herself and about men; and it is also at the graveyard that the solution to the problem and the resolution of the play is presented, Here, 'Old Woman' forgives the men who have hurt her and clears the curse while Kande promises to put an end to wife inheritance and other practices that subdue and oppress women. If the shrine marks the starting point of Aetu's curse, it is the grave where human life ends where the spell is finally broken. Yerima's conscious selection of these locales is central to the narrative.

"What is it to be a woman?": Defining Womanhood and Femininity in *Aetu*

One of the concerns explored in the play is the meaning and definition of 'woman' and 'womenhood' or femininity. While the play presents the dire and abusive situation of Aetu, it nevertheless tries to detach from her personal experience in order to explore the more general condition of womanhood. In the French sociological study, *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir criticizes social conception that allows a woman to be "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other" (1949:76). From de Beauvoir's point of argument and one which has been central to western feminism, the woman perceived as a relegated and inferior version of the man and, therefore, always be the victim. This prejudiced categorization of the woman is seen as mythic and biased by American feminist Betty Friedan. In a move to demythologize the biased chauvinistic and misogynistic view of the male gender over the female, Friedan claims that a myth is invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state (1963). In *Aetu*, questions of woman's 'otherness', are explored through the story of the central female character. The importance of women's perspective is also underscored by the

inclusion of several other prominent female voices which also add texture and complexity to the issues it raises. Through this dramatic device, Yerima's alignment with women is made clear. An early scene in the play highlights its concerns not only with the experience of gender oppression but with the definition of gender itself. In a conversation between Aetu and two young girls who are helping her to get dressed and made up for her third marriage, Aetu condemns firstly the school of thought, either supported by women or instituted by men, which sees a woman as property belonging to man and as creatures fashioned for man's use:

> Kudi: Then, what is it to be a woman, Aunty? My mother says that women were created to satisfy the pleasures of men.
>
> Aetu: Your mother was never a wise woman. She was playing with sand when we, her mates, had started to cover our breasts and fetch water from the stream …
>
> Yunde: Tell us Aunty, what it is to be a woman. Is it all pain then?
>
> Aetu: No, but from the lashes of my eyelids, to be a woman is to be one with the universe. To give life to the universe, to enjoy and serve the pleasures of life … to bear the joy and pain of being the vehicle of life. Orunmila, Baba Ifa, the god of wisdom says that, to be a woman is to be wise as Orunmila, smart as Esu, strong as Sango, and weak as Obirin, all at the same time, while still endowed with the charms and purity of Obatala. (40-41)

This conversation foregrounds questions concerning the definition of a woman. It suggests that womanhood can be defined in different ways and that the ways in which it is defined, or the ways in which femininity is constructed, has important consequences for the way in which women are treated.

Interestingly, the concern with the definition of a 'woman' forms the starting point of Simone de Beauvoir's text. De Beauvoir's attempts to engage with the concept of womanhood stems from her reading of great philosophical thinkers such as Aristotle and St Thomas Aquinas. Citing Aristotle's statement that 'the female is a female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities', De Beauvoir argues that because society (chiefly represented by men) sees women as an imperfect version of themselves, women become defined as the 'Other'. As she goes on to explain, "woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality" (de Beauvoir, 1949:20). Kudi's assumptions that women were created to satisfy pleasures of men and her view that to be a woman is to endure pain unfortunately accords with de Beauvoir's analysis of women's status in western society, that they are compelled to assume the

status of the Other. However, Aetu's response to Kudi's question firmly counters the widely-held view that to be a woman is to be the recipient of suffering and pain. She therefore disputes the conventional equation of womanhood and suffering, an equation which provides justification for bad treatment and exploitative practices. A well-known exemplar of this perspective is Ma'Shingayi in Tsitsi Dangaremgba's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) who laments that "this business of womanhood is a heavy burden" (16). Her advice to her daughter is that she should accept the status that has been ascribed by men: "And these days it is worse … Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength" (1988:16).

In contrast to this portrait of resigned suffering, Aetu's alternative idea that women are "one with the universe" is suggestive of magnitude and power: the universe is large and embodies other large planets. Alternatively, her words could also be interpreted as invoking the more conservative idea that the woman is big enough to take on all the demands of womanhood – spiritual, domestic and sexual. Also worth highlighting however is Aetu's view that women are those who take pleasure as well as give it. This works against the stereotype of women as providers of pleasure and advances the idea that women have the right to experience the same joy and fulfilment as men. Aetu thus openly condemns what in some quarters has been used as a means of understanding the life of a woman, namely a life based on suffering and pain. Her emphasis on women's pleasure falls in line with much of the impetus of African feminism which, as Aduke Adebayo argues, "is not only about defining the negative experiences of women. It is about the unique and positive experiences of African women; for to be an African woman is, and can be a beautiful experience at home, at work, and in the wider society" (1995:5).

Extending her criticism of the idea that womanhood is defined by suffering, Aetu goes on to invoke a number of comparisons between a woman and some Yoruba gods. Drawing on the wisdom and authority of the gods, she asserts that a woman is as wise as *Orunmila* (the all-knowing deity in the Yoruba cosmic mythology), as smart as *Esu* (trickster god and messenger) and as strong as *Sango* (god of thunder). While claiming the qualities of wisdom, cunningness and strength for women, she also repeats the more conventional stereotype of women as aligned with the charms and purity of *Obatala* (god of creation), thus reasserting a general belief in the Yoruba world that the woman is the spiritual figure of the home. Some of the tensions of her position are also evident in her tautological conclusion that women should be as weak as *Obirin* which is the Yoruba word

for female. In these words, she appears to confirm the view that the essence of woman is weakness. Aetu's statement is contradictory and ambiguous: while she offers a comparison between woman and deific beings, she also accedes to the weakness of the *Obirin* in the Yoruba world. Her contraction I suggest, posits that the life of a woman is dualistic in nature. On the one hand, there is weakness but on the other, there is strength and deific status. In addition, by likening 'woman' to different Yoruba gods and deities, she also echoes the popular Yoruba saying "*Orisa bi'ya kosi*" (There is no deity comparable to a mother). Some feminists would argue that this kind of proclamation is also oppressive to women because it enshrines motherhood as privileged way of being, thus suggesting that to be a woman is to be a mother and being a woman and refusing to take the status of a mother is dishonouring and shameful. Aetu's response to Kudi's question speaks to a profound ambiguity in her position: while offering a powerful challenge to male-authored perspectives on women she also falls back on conservative definitions of appropriate womanhood and conventional roles.

The above discussion suggests that there are many competing definitions of womanhood and that these are evident in both critical scholarship and literary texts. From the different views of a woman above as stated either by scholars such as Oyewumi, Aluko and Aderinto, to characters like Kudi, Ma'Shingayi and Aetu, the definition of womanhood is ambiguous and highly contested. Kudi's mother claims that women are meant "to satisfy the pleasures of men", Oyewumi claims that men and women have always been equal and, Ma'Shingayi admonishes her daughter to "accept the status that has been ascribed to her by men and learn how to carry her burdens with strength", while Aetu initially equates the woman to selected Yoruba deities but, she concludes by admitting woman's subservience. This ambiguity seems to correlate with Tony Lawson's dilemma as to what the signifier 'woman' is. Noting historical and other factors as influential in the unstable definition of a woman, he states that "the fact of historical differences means that each "woman differs from every other and it is impossible or meaningless to talk of the 'authentic woman' and so to unify different individuals under the signifier 'woman'" (2007:139). Lawson's concern is seen not only in the discussion of this chapter, it permeates through feminist discourses all over the world.

Despite the ambiguities about gender which surface in the play, Aetu's definition of a woman nevertheless points to something more stable or less contested. This is that womanhood is not defined as anger or hostility towards men. As I go on to explore, the idea that men are not the

enemies of women has been fundamental for feminist theories that have surfaced in Africa, thus distinguishing African feminism from those that have been produced in the West. Aetu's response is striking because although it speaks of ill-treatment, it does not identify the (male) agents as culprits. Rather, what is emphasised is an alternative vision of women's power and strength and an invocation of the universe which of course includes men. This correlates clearly with African womanist and Nego-feminist gender theories which essentially conclude that men are not the enemies of women, there is no competition or strife between them, and that their unified aim is for communal or cooperate development.

Women's Voices

Most first generation Nigerian writers such as Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe give a subordinate role to women especially in their early literary works and, as Amazon (2006) and Fonchingong (2006) have argued, tend to link their identities to those of mother and wife. By contrast, Yerima gives prominent roles to the female characters in his plays and use them to speak directly to his society. While doing so, he demands that the society recognizes women and listen to their voices rather than deriving pleasure or satisfaction from their cries. In her anger and frustration at being prevented from performing the curse, Aetu accuses the priest, Saura, of deriving pleasure from the pain of women when she indictes Saura as being "one of those men who prefer listening to the muffled cries of women rather than their voices" (15). This statement suggests that Yerima understands that traditional practices silence women; he therefore harnesses this story as a means of exposing and challenging them.

As if to counteract the authoritative voice of male supremacy and women's historical 'voicelessness', the play includes a number of women's voices and their various positions on women's experiences as they are explored in the play. These opinions are often contradictory and heterogeneous yet, by these means, the play gives women a say in their story. The conclusion of the competing and contradictory perspectives in the play gestures toward Mikhali Bakhtin's notion of 'polyphony' (1981), an idea which refers to the existence of multiple voices within a literary text where characters are able to articulate a variety of positions, sometimes even against the author. According to Bakhtin, polyphony entails a literary situation where there is "a plurality of

independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (1984:6). In similar fashion, as in *Aetu*, the different voices and opinions of the characters are given as much importance as the author of the play who seemingly has no monopoly over the 'message' of the text. This device allows not only for the articulation of contradictory perspectives but also gives prominence to the voices and opinions of women.

The polyphonic emphasis of the play is evident not only in the dialogue between Aetu and Kudi discussed earlier but is also at work in the exchange that occurs between the two midwives responsible for Aetu's third delivery. Having had two sons by her two previous husbands, Aetu is now in labour with her third son (by her third husband). A conversation takes place between the traditional midwives Agbebi and Agbesu who are helping with the delivery:

> Agbebi: Then she should count herself lucky if a family loves her enough to want her to stay. It is a great honour. She cooks well I suppose … and … (*looks between Aetu's legs*) two earlier children, she is lucky … she is still tight and firm … this is why the brothers love her, and won't let her go. Be thankful to Olodumare. Push girl.
>
> Agbesu: You flatter her. And it is unfair. An Opo … a forced widowed wife … that explains her bitterness. And what is good about that?
>
> Agbebi: Why should she be bitter? It is good for a family to find a woman useful. She should thank her head. (46-48)

Agbebi describes Aetu's domestic prowess and sexual allure - her genital is 'still tight and firm' - as a blessing because through this means she becomes acceptable to her in-law's family. Agbebi's words suggest that Aetu is rotated amongst her husband's brothers because of the love they have for her, an idea which is disproved by the men themselves. This is a disingenuous argument for the practice of wife inheritance, one which provides a justification for woman's lack of agency. Agbebi finalises her claim by stating that Aetu should be thankful to *Olodumare* (the Yoruba god of creation) for possessing the kind of characteristics that are appreciated by men. Agbesu, by contrast, sees this "luck" as totally chauvinistic and unfair. While Agbebi perceives Aetu's fate as resulting from love and good luck, Agbesu sees Aetu's predicament as one of coercion and pain since everything is done against the wish of the victim. This contradictory interchange in the play speaks to the polyphonic nature of the text's engagement with gender questions.

Property of the Deceased

As suggested in the exchange discussed above, a central concern in Yerima's *oeuvre* pertains to the practice of wife inheritance or levirate marriage. This practice entails that a widow should be married to her husband's brother or male kin after the death of her husband so that she can remain in the family. This has been an age-long practice spanning thousands of years. The first record of the incident can be traced to the biblical book of Genesis which records the story of Tamar, a man who married Er but died because of his wicked deeds. Judah, Er's father, responded by commanding Onan, Er's brother, to "Go unto thy brother's wife, and marry her, and raise up seed" (8). And as an instruction, Deuteronomy 25:5 states that, "if brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband's brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband's brother unto her". As these examples suggest, the chief motivation of levirate marriage was to ensure continued procreation, especially in situations when the husband dies without leaving a male heir. A further reason is to provide care for the widow. According to Samson Olanisebe and Olusegun Oladosu, "among the Jews and the traditional Yoruba, measures are put in place to take care of the widows through widow's inheritance" (2014:1). What is also clear yet disturbing is that widows in the Yoruba culture were and are classified along with other property the husband leave behind as 'property of the deceased'. As Olanisebe and Oladosu explain, "the property to be shared ranges from farmland, houses, material property, landed property and the widow of the deceased" (2014:4). Again, the biblical echoes are striking. One of the Ten Commandments states that "you shall not covet your neighbour's house. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour" (Exodus, 20:17). According to this logic, women are listed as things belonging to the husband and are categorized as "anything" which suggests why they are regarded as property. They are described alongside house, servants, ox and donkey – a description which is questionable as it considers her a material possession. She is objectified as other non-living properties belonging to a man. Susan Dente Ross and Paul Martin Lester observe that "objectification is problematic because making women into things erases their desires. Objects do not have feelings or preferences. Things do not have opinions, and they cannot disagree. If someone desires them, they can be had" (2011:196). Equally, this practice, known as *isupo* is a form of objectification of women by men through the vehicle of culture which sometimes degenerates to such an extent that

a widow is made over to a man who is as young as her child or son if she had one for her late husband.

In contrast to the pronouncements of men, the playwright uses female characters like Aetu, 'Old Woman', Agbesu and a few others to convey the feelings of women concerning these despotic practices. In different scenes and from varying standpoints, these characters articulate their distinctive positions on wife inheritance in the play. In the next section, I analyse these perspectives, beginning with Aetu, the character who bears the brunt of these practices.

In response to being made over for her second marriage, Aetu laments: "What kind of a life is that? Now I have to be used again. One man's pleasure multiplies my pain" (40). Aetu finds nothing good in transferring a her from one brother to another in the name of tradition. And in this case, she perceives herself as being "used" again to satisfy other men's pleasure which leads to the multiplication of her pain. Phrases such as these emphasize the fact that Aetu's experience of marriage is one of exploitation and suffering. However, in a polyphonic enactment, Yerima uses Agbebi, the traditional mid-wife's view as a counter to Aetu's position. According to Agbebi, Aetu "should count herself lucky if a family loves her enough to want her to stay. It is a great honour" (46). The scenario almost depicts a situation when it is assumed that a woman would be poorly treated, so when she is fairly treated, she is expected to be grateful. Agbebi's views echo those of the young girl, Kudi. Kudi goes as far as wishing to have the same fate as Aetu by stating that she wants to be like Aetu when she grows up. For Yunde, another young lady who is busy adorning the bride (Aetu), her dream is to grow up and be loved by different men just like Aetu. She says: "Oh, how I wish I were you ... To have men flock around me, buying expensive gifts for me. You must teach me the trick. I must marry a rich man" (39). This inclusion of a number of different perspectives helps the reader to understand the different views of Yoruba women on the belief and practice of *isupo*. Whereas some women like Aetu and Old Woman reject it, others like Agbebi, Kudi and Yunde considered being desirable and getting male attention as qualities to be proud of.

The various responses to the topic of *isupo* also raise the question of marriage in the play. The topic of marriage is a prominent theme in Nigerian and South African writing by women. In her novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), for example, Buchi Emecheta condemns oppressive marriage institutions as condoned and practiced by some cultures in Nigeria, particularly in the story of an Igbo woman, Nnu-Ego who asks "God, when will [He] create a woman who will be

fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" (186). Writing in a much earlier period, South African author, Olive Schreiner also presents marriage as an oppressive institution which confines women to particular roles. In *The Story of the African Farm* (1884), Lyndall responds to a question about whether or not she will be married with the words: "I am not in so great a hurry to put my head beneath a man's shoes; and I do not so greatly admire the crying of babies" (150). Where Nnu-Ego asserts an ideal of women's autonomy, Lyndall presents marriage as submission and burden.

As explored above, Aetu views marriage as a form of exploitation. When it comes to the true notion of *isupo* and the prospect of re-marrying, the dominant idea is one of shame. Describing her third marriage, she remarks: "Hold my hand, as I walk into another session of mockery. The sacrifice is ready, let the old fool prepare to feast. Esu I step out again … again and again in tune with your jeers and laughter. Women, take me to the dance of shame" (41). Seeking solidarity and support, Aetu asks that her hand be held by her female compatriots, that they might escort her to "another session of mockery and a dance of shame". Aetu describes herself as a sacrifice which is to be feasted upon by another man "again and again and again". The words "jeers and laughter" make reference to the emotional torture she experiences at the hands of the community. Since she has lost two husbands to death already, her image in the community has become that of a 'husband killer' whose fate is consistently to incur death upon her husband, hence the jeers and laughter. Aetu also describes her third marriage as a "dance of shame", a phrase which in Yoruba culture, directly recalls the opposing term, honour. As the passage suggests, her sense of her fate as shameful is also shared by the community dwellers as she becomes an object of ridicule and laughter. The threefold repetition of "again" represents the three times she has been given over and forced into marriage. In the Yoruba belief system, a sacrifice is offered as either a preventive or curative measure. In this sense, the continuous marriage of Aetu to different brothers as well as her subsequent death ultimately brings an end to this form of marital practice, as she becomes the sacrifice for the younger women so that they will not face the same fate. Although she must go through an needless sacrifice in order to resist levirate marriage, Aetu's suicide seems to carry positive charge in the play in the sense that her death brings an end to this form of oppression. It could even be understood as a form of resistance as it liberates other young girls and women who may potentially face similar situations. This could be understood in terms of the consequentialist paradigm. Consequentialism is an ethical theory which posits that the consequences of a person's

conduct is the only and correct way of judging what is right or wrong. According to Amartya Sen (1987), "consequentialism demands, in particular, that the rightness of actions be . . . judged entirely by the goodness of consequences" (75). Nineteenth century philosopher, Jeremy Bentham's argument about utilitarianism are also opposite here:

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. On the one hand the standard of right and wrong, on the other the chain of causes and effects, are fastened to their throne. They govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think. (1789:1)

Drawing on the notion of consequentialism and Bentham's proposition, it is possible to argue that even though painful and requiring the loss of life of Aetu, the consequence of her death leads to direct abolition of the dehumanizing levirate marriage practice.

Another character used in the play to stage women's responses to widow inheritance is 'Old Woman'. 'Old Woman' is a seventy-year old woman who epitomises the concept within the Yoruba world that an old individual is an embodiment of knowledge, experience and wisdom. She is the reincarnated or restless apparition of Aetu. After Aetu has enacted the curse at the *Esu* shrine, Saura informs her that if she refuses to drink *omi idi Esu* (water from the shrine of *Esu*) she will continue to roam the earth even after death. Aetu refuses to heed Saura's warning and so, after committing suicide, she roams the earth for seventy years until she meets Saura again; at this point, she finally drinks the water and her spirit comes to rest. Here, Yerima introduces the concept of *akudayaism* (the Yoruba mythological belief in the restless roaming on the earth of a dead soul who has not found rest with the ancestors) which can also be described as *badoo*. The idea of *akudaya* helps the playwright to further elaborate on the subject of gender oppression in the Yoruba community as the notion of the wandering spirit becomes a powerful metaphor in describing the experience of the suffering of women and the psychological effects of oppressive cultural practices. If she lived a restless and tortured life while she was alive, she is also made to wander for another seventy years in a different form after her death.

Old Woman resides at the grave for these seventy-years thereby becoming, as she describes it, the "watchman of the graveyard" where she performs several duties which include "not allowing people coming to the graveyard to make sacrifices thereby disturbing the dead" (12). As mentioned earlier, she describes the details of Aetu's suffering by taking the reader back, using the technique

of dramatic analepsis. She expresses her views on *isupo* in particular when she describes Aetu's second marriage in the following terms: "the day she was made over to her second husband, the woman was stripped of her honour" (30). As suggested earlier, this statement not only affirms the negative judgment regarding wife inheritance already articulated in the play, it also touches on the subject of honour mentioned above. This notion of honour carries enormous weight in traditional Yoruba communities. Amongst the Yoruba people, honour is considered an essential virtue: without honour, one is most negligible. This is expounded in the work of historian Olufunke Adeboye (2007) and is also represented in Wole Soyinka's legendary play, *Death and the King's Horseman* (1976). In these works, these authors explain the importance of honour in Yorubaland and why people – and leaders in particular – would rather commit suicide than live a life without honour. For instance, in *Death and the King's Horseman*, the chief and leader of the community is supposed to commit a ritual suicide which will make him escort the dead king to the place of the ancestors. But due to his aggrandized sense of self, Olokun Esin does not perform his customary duty. Because his refusal is an act of shame for himself and his family, his only son Olunde commits suicide in order to restore the family's honour. Seeing that he has lost all honour and respect, Olokun Esin takes his life as a way of escaping from shame and mortification. As a person who understands the importance of honour in the Yoruba world, 'Old Woman' knows that as soon as Aetu has been made over to the second husband and then the third one, she has lost her honour which is why the people resorted to calling her names. Just like Olokun Esin in *Death and the King's Horseman*, Aetu can no longer find a place in society because she has lost her honour. In acts of what could be described as 'self-inflicted shame', Olokun Esin commits suicide because he refuses to perform his duty and Aetu commits suicide because of the tradition to which she is trying to escape. According to the Yoruba saying *iku ya jesin* (death is preferable to dishonour). Although in both cases of suicide, these characters do so in order to repair their damaged honour, there seems to be difference in what drives them. While Olokun Esin's and Olunde's suicide is about conforming, Aetu's is about escaping and resisting traditional rules. In this cultural context, it is unsurprising that Aetu chooses death rather than staying alive to endure dishonour.

Old Woman's account of Aetu's life provides some sense of paradox. By conforming to shared norms, it is expected that she feels a sense of belonging and be accorded respect but, in Aetu's case, she becomes an object of shame in the community. In answer to Kande's desire to know at

what point or on what particular day his grandmother, Aetu decided to take her life, Old Woman gives the following account:

> The day she married her third husband … she flowed in names and shame. After her first dance of shame, she was called opo, one who evokes pity, enthroned by death … Iku baba yeye o. Her second dance in which she became Okan jole, the thief of the heart of men. She has begun to lose the garb of pity, which Iku had given her and was beginning to wear the garb of thief. On her third, she became all in all, the Queen of greed, Okanjuwa. With all these names, how could she think straight, son?. (36)

The use of the metaphor, "flowed in names and shame" enhances the impression that Aetu's life in that community has become unbearable and that she is without honour and, therefore, bears a 'bad' name. In desperation, she takes a decision to eliminate this shame by committing suicide. As Old Woman suggests, the title of 'widow' should accord a woman some sense of respect as well as provide her with a recognizable social identity even if it nevertheless conforms to the idea of a woman's relative identity. As a widow, she is an object of pity, but she still retains the dignity of a woman "enthroned by death". However, after the death of her second husband, she is given the name, "okan jole", the thief of the heart of men. This designates her as deceitful, even malicious; she becomes an object of suspicion, suspected of murdering her husband. After the death of her third husband, these suspicions would appear to be confirmed. The third name "queen of greed, okanjuwa" mocks her as being unduly avaricious and evil. This is because, in the Yoruba tradition, when a woman loses more than one husband to death, people begin to question her integrity. What one observes from this scenario is that while this patriarchal society forces Aetu into a series of unwanted marriages, the same society condemns how she reacts to such disgraceful marriage by calling her offensive names. What the play suggests is that women are condemned whether they accede to tradition or try to resist it. Either way, the society ruled and controlled by men – and supported by women – continues to make life unbearable for her.

In this example, by giving space to community attitudes, Yerima also broadens the focus to include the practice of widow accusation. For instance, Gbade accuses Fausat, the first wife of late Oke, of killing her husband but the charges are unproven and baseless. He also claims that her childlessness is the cause of the death of her husband, his brother: "The rumour is that you killed him. Jealous of the wealth of the children of the other women, you killed him" (32). Abike, the second wife of the deceased is also accused of the same crime. Unlike Fausa who has no child,

Abike has fifteen of them. And so, Gbade accuses her of 'overusing' his brother which results in his death. While Fausa's childlessness is used against her, Abike's fertility is equally used against her. What these varied examples suggest is that a woman is by definition guilty, and a reason can always be found to condemn her. In the case of Aetu, although no family member accuses her of having a hand in the deaths of her husbands, villagers call her such names as; "okanjuawa", "okanjole" and "husband killer" and publicly denounce her as a murderer. In her case, based on the general belief regarding fate and destiny within the Yoruba world, the people believe that Aetu is the architect of the death of her three husbands as she has been fated to bring damnation to whoever she is married to. From the perspective of the villagers, her life and those of her dead husbands are doomed already as this was her (*ayanma*) fate. Ironically, this general belief is shown to be justified because Aetu is in fact responsible for these deaths because her spells resulted in the death of her husbands and her. The implication of this point of view is that, rather than look at the cause of Aetu's self-destructive move, the people believe she should be blamed for everything she has suffered.

Old Woman's perspective on Aetu's situation is clear and direct. She points to a humiliating system of social shaming which Aetu has to endure as well as being forced into marriages. She thus goes out of her way to exculpate Aetu and to explain what drives her to suicide. 'Old Woman' also presents a negative assessment of customary practice by focusing on the trauma of social humiliation, a humiliation which is encoded in language, sanctified by practice and detrimental to the lives of the woman. For her, the major problem with this practice is that, for the most part, it goes against the wishes of the woman. That is, they are forced by custom to obey these systems. As *Aetu* makes clear, these laws are not enforced in a physical way but are instituted through traditions and customs. In contrast to this accepted convention, 'Old Woman' represents the view that all people should be able to determine their lives: she suggests that women should not be subjected to the authority of men.

A further perspective on the subject of wife inheritance is provided by Iyawe, Aetu's senior wife with her third husband. Like Aetu, she calls these husbands "old fools" for making the young and innocent Aetu go through such torture: "The old fools are her husbands. All of them brothers, including the biggest fool of them all, my husband" (46). Iyawe's caustic comments undermine the patriarchal status of men. They come from her sympathy for Aetu who she sees as being too

young to go through such humiliation and also from her own negative experience of polygamy. Iyawe calls these men (old men who keep on marrying young women and propagating polygamous homes) "old fools" which downplays their positions as men. The fact that she calls these men by these appellations suggest that she, like Aetu, has little or no respect for these men. This opinion that men are fools is echoed by almost all the women in the play. These women's choice to condemn and judge chauvinistic men, and call them names seem to posit that, even though nego-feminism and African womanism which are considered reconciliatory and more aligned to women's form of resistance in this play suggests accommodation, it does not take away women's right to accuse, judge and berate abusive men for their behaviours. In contrast to the women characters in the play, none of the male characters seem to oppose to this practice. Other than Saura the *Esu* priest, all other male characters exhibit some form of complicit masculinity. This is a form of masculinity theorized by Raewyn Connell, which, although is not hegemonic, tends not to condemn hegemonic masculinity.

Many traditions and practices around the world are oppressive to women because the rules and standards upon which these practices are based have for the most part been authored by men. In the case of *isupo*, the practice continues because of the various selfish benefits men continue to derive from it, something Raewyn Connell terms "patriarchal dividends" (2005). As noted earlier, the topic of *isupo* takes central place in Yerima's play. In his author's note, Yerima asks, "Can the practice stop?" and he replies, "Sadly, no. Not as long as man has eyes to see, and greed lives within him" (2007:7). According to Yerima, the practice of wife inheritance will not stop. This seems to contradict the resolution of the play which suggests that Kande, now the *Olori Ebi*, is ready to put a stop to it.

Aetu is the symbolic casualty of this practice as she watches while the property left behind by her deceased husband Oke is shared between his brothers and other men in the family. A few days after the burial of her husband, Aetu is called to a family meeting, a patriarchal affair which bears close resemblance to the family meeting called in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981). The meeting is opened by Gbade the eldest male and Olori Ebi (family head):

> Gbade: Otedola, today I make my choice of my brother's properties. First is the land at the riverside, good for the planting of rice. The cocoa farm at the centre of the village to the left, the two houses at Ije, the kolanut farm at Oke oko, and of course for the sake of my

> impending old age, I shall take this Tapa woman to enrich my bed. If I die with her by my side caring for my every need, let no one blame the gods for loving me. I am not a greedy man. Otedola, take your desires and let the children have what is left. Our brother lived well, it is our right to enjoy his wealth after him. Thank you. (34)

After selecting the best of the landed property, Gbade chooses Aetu as his inheritance as well. He then passes the baton to Otedola who is next in the family ranking to make his choice after which all 'left-overs' are shared by the male children of the deceased. In this context, there is absolutely no room for Aetu to reject Gbade's declaration: with the words, "I shall take", he binds her to him and she is obliged to accept. This dramatic enactment of a scene of hegemonic patriarchy is at odds with the widely-held view of *isupo* as a form of benign protection for vulnerable widows. Rather than the desire to protect and care for the widow, the play suggests, it is the satisfaction of men's greed that drives the establishment of such laws or practices. The phrase "to enrich my bed" suggests that, rather than marry her with the ambition of taking care of her, Gbade marries Aetu because he wants her to satisfy his sexual needs. This is a practice that is informed by a common definition of 'woman' based on the pleasure she gives to men.

One is tempted to relate this self-absorbed position to the preposterous comments made by the president of Nigeria (at the time of writing this thesis), Muhammadu Buhari on the 14th of October 2016 during a state visit to Berlin. On this occasion, as reported by the BBC News, he made the remark that: "[my wife] belongs to my kitchen and my living room, and the other room" (http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37659863). In these comments, President Muhammadu Buhari restricts his wife's dwelling or 'living' space to certain corners of his house, confirming a spatial delineation of womanhood which accords with the traditional roles of cook, confidante and sexual partner. In similar fashion, Gbade in Yerima's play limits his wife's role to satisfying his domestic and sexual needs. The use of the metaphor "enrich" appears to lure the audience into believing that Gbade considers Aetu a central part of his life. However, the subsequent reference to his bed suggests that Gbade identifies Aetu's role as primarily sexual.

"Twisted tongue and forced growth". When is a girl matured enough to become a bride?

The play's critical engagement with the practice of *isupo* also extends to a review of the complementary practice of child marriage which, according to research conducted by the United

Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) entitled, *Marrying too Young, End Child Marriage*, "remains a real and present threat to the human rights, lives and health of children, especially girls" (2010:10). Speaking further about this threat, UNFPA notes that: "one in three girls in low and middle income countries (excluding China) will marry before the age of 18. One in nine girls will marry before their fifteenth birthday" (10). In an earlier report presented by UNICEF in 2001, it is recorded that: "Poverty is one of the major practice common in some Middle Eastern and South Asian societies, is a family survival strategy, and may even be seen as in her interests" (5). According to UNICEF, Nigeria is ranked one of the countries with the highest number of girl child marriages in the world with "twenty-three million girls and women who are married in childhood" (2015:5). Many of Yerima's plays deal directly with this subject. In the play, the protagonist marries Oke at the age of fourteen while Tobi in another of Yerima's play *The Wives* (2007) marries chief Gbadegesin at the age of seventeen. Other than the fact that the common denominator in these marriages: brides being under-aged, the male spouses are both 'over-aged': seventy years old. In this sense, Yerima's plays *Aetu* and *The Wives* can be read as an attempt by this playwright to comment on the growing pressure to end girl-child marriage in Nigeria.

Raped at the tender age of fourteen by a man of seventy, Aetu becomes prey to early child marriage when she is forced into a marriage with her rapist and subsequently becomes pregnant with his child. This event is the pivotal moment in the play as it propels her to visit the shrine of *Esu* where she casts an extremely powerful spell with devastating consequences on all the men who are sexually associated with her. During this encounter, the *Esu* priest, Saura, constantly and rightly refers to Aetu as 'child', 'girl', and 'little girl'. However, she rebuffs these signifiers by claiming that her travails have transported her from the state of an innocent child to that of a suffering woman. Saura initially tries to talk her out of making the curse insisting that she is not only too young to visit the shrine alone but also that she is too young to cast a spell. At this juncture, she accuses Saura of silencing her:

> Aetu: And so? Does a woman not feel the pains of the heart? Has a woman, aggrieved, no right to a voice? (*chuckles*) I see you are one of those who prefer the muffled cries of a woman, not her voice. *Shioo*!
>
> Saura: Mind your tongue girl, I see you are not afraid of my god, Esu.
>
> Aetu: But I am … that is why I have left the safety of my house to be here tonight. I am afraid of the gods …

Saura: (*now obviously angry*) You are determined to push me to anger. You little child.

Aetu: (chuckles again) I wish I were a child, Baba. Lost in my childhood play … innocent, silly and coy I wish, Baba … but see … how well I have grown … teeth and all at my first crawl. (*Rises, so that she can push her stomach out*.) See, I am with a child, put there by an *Agbaya* … an old fool like … (*looks at him intently*.)

Saura: Your tongue, *girl* …mind what you say to me before my god.

Aetu: Then you look at me again, Abesu. Would a girl carry this? Eight months of pain gone. Enh? I say would a girl carry this? A man did this, Baba … and I am always in pain for a moment's pleasure of a smelly aged he-goat. Priest, let me … I say let me do what I have come here to do her in your shrine.

Saura: An aged smelly fool? A he-goat?

Aetu: Yes, Baba. How do you expect me to describe a bearded he-goat on heat trying to climb his daughter … smelly … an orangutan …brother to a baboon …?

Saura: *Woman* …

Aetu: I am happy at least now you call me a woman. … Baba, forgive me, I fear the gods … always … and I respect you … I beg you, let me do what I paid you to do.

Saura: (shakes his head) *Young child* … you talk too fast. I do not understand you.

Aetu: My tongue is as twisted and forced to grow … as my whole body is … and you still call me a *mere girl*?

Saura: The problem is that you are so angry. A *woman* with a child should not be this angry, or a drop of bile may touch the tongue of the one that you carry …

Saura: Who is your husband *woman*? (15-17)

The forceful manner in which Aetu is raped and married is described in animalistic terms as she compares her husband Oke to a bearded he-goat, smelly orangutan and 'brother to a baboon'. The animal references and the use of the verb 'to climb' create a disturbing picture of her older husband as grotesque, over-sexed and less than human. By describing herself as his 'daughter', she also plays with the idea of the rape as a kind of incest.

What is also suggested from the passage is that, within a very short space of time, enforced marriage has transformed Aetu from an innocent child into an abused and exploited woman who now burns with anger and rage. And while Saura still finds it hard to call her a woman because of her age, Aetu continues to make her case. Taiwo Osanyemi & B. A. Adedeji rightly point out that Aetu's "negative transformation from innocence to anger and vendetta vividly showcases dislocation, displacement, disillusionment, indifference and marginalization the obvious hallmarks

of gender consciousness" (2017:13). Osanyemi and Adedeji's observation of Aetu's unwanted, sudden and cruel transformation justifies her sudden and potential rash reaction to her abuse. By the end of her conversation with Saura, Aetu succeeds in convincing him that even though she is only fourteen years old and carrying a bay for a seventy-year old man, she is now a woman as she has lost her innocence. This, not only by virtue of her sexual experiences but because of the pain she has gone through, the exploitation she has been exposed to and the knowledge that she has acquired through her experiences. After this conversation, Saura never refers to her as girl or little child again but as a woman.

Aetu describes the physical and psychological effects of this early marriage using the image of a "twisted tongue" and through the idea of 'forced growth'. The latter image suggests the physical suffering that results from child pregnancy as well as the idea of accelerated and unnatural growth. This knowledge is reinforced by the metaphorical description that she had "grown teeth and all at [her] first crawl" and, most importantly, in the repetition of words associated with speech such as, 'voice', 'cries', 'tongue', 'teeth' and 'talk'. The repetition of these words reinforces the play's critique of voicelessness and lack of agency, also introducing the idea of abnormality and the grotesque. Aetu's cries are "muffled", her tongue is "twisted" and "forced", her teeth have "grown" and her talk is "fast". i.e., unnatural. These figurations can be understood to signify the many ways in which women's speech and their ability to be heard are jeopardized by this practice.

Aetu's history of trauma explains why she continues to engage the priest in a disrespectful way, thus risking his anger. What is interesting is the fact that Aetu is able to successfully convince Saura, the *Esu* priest, that forced marriage has effected an unnatural transformation from little child to angry and sad woman. According to Yoruba myth, the *Esu* priest is as old as time and creation. That Aetu is able to convince him to accept that the mistreatment she has been subjected to have forced out the woman in her even though she is a child, signals the play's sympathetic treatment of has plight. In this sense, Saura who is both representative of a deity and a man comes to a position in which he also condemns girl-child marriage.

Aetu is a child who claims she has developed into a woman. However, her decision to curse herself, her future sexual partners and, worst of all, her kinfolk to the fourth generation reveals her gullibility and ignorance. Despite countless warnings from Saura, amongst which is that her soul will become restless and continue to roam the earth, she goes ahead and initiates the curse.

Furthermore, when the antidotes against the fulfilment of the curses are offered to her, she rejects them. Aetu commits suicide after delivering another baby to her third husband as the torture becomes unbearable. By so doing, she also experiences death just like the men upon whom she has cast the spell. The curse is a means of punishing the men for the ways in which they have treated her and thus becomes a broader indictment of the society at large. The fact that she is willing to go to such great lengths to exact revenge on men is powerfully suggestive of her life of pain. What is also suggested is that for women in her position, there are very few alternatives and that in order to reject this system one has to be prepared to sacrifice oneself. From the perspective of Aetu's pain, the play suggests that the peace of the woman is also the peace of the man which means that for the society to run well, both genders need to be at peace with themselves. And to be at peace with one another, all gender bigotry should be erased.

Considering the play's concerns in relation to human rights, it is clear that Aetu's right as a child is violated mercilessly. In both international systems and the African Charter, the rights of a child and girlchild are clearly stated. The International Human Rights drafted after the second world war declares that "marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). The African Charter, which was adopted by the Organisation of African Union (OAU) in 1990, Article 21 states that "governments should do what they can to stop harmful social and cultural practices, such as child marriage, that affect the welfare and dignity of children" (Article 21, section 2). Looking at these rights which consist of both international and continental guidelines, they posit that marriage should be based on consent. However, the African Charter also declares that children below the age of eighteen should be protected from such a marriage. Through *Aetu*, we see how the global concern of rape and child-marriage is carefully commented on.

Conclusion

Like most of Yerima's gender-focused plays, Aetu offers a positive resolution to the problems set up in the play. While the play opens up a space in which different voices are assembled in order to offer a variety of perspectives on repressive cultural practices, the problems are resolved by turning to the younger generation of males who are represented in the figure of Kande, the

grandson of Aetu. This younger generation is presented in a positive light as those who are more amenable to ideas of gender equality, as those who can learn from the painful stories of their elders about the damaging effects of patriarchal norms. As a result of what he has heard at the shrine, Kande, makes a promise that such practices will come to an end:

> Old Woman: … But you children must stop the act that forces a human spirit against his or her will. Come, child. (Chuckles) I send you a message that is beyond your age.
>
> Kande: (on his knees) It will never happen again. Not within the walls of this house. I am the Olori ebi, the oldest child alive and the head of this family after my father. I give my words, Mama, Never! (54)

Old Woman makes use of the phrase "human spirit" to suggest that, just like a man, the woman is also human. And the term "spirit" which in the Yoruba cosmology could mean human's spiritual personality – should not be forced or coerced into accepting and practicing a belief she does not agree to. Although 'Old Woman' acknowledges that her demands of Kande is "beyond" his age since the practice has been in existence for generations, she also understands that the prevention of such traditional acts would be a gradual process, and that the example of one family would be a powerful way to achieve it.

At the end of the play, Kande who is now the head of the family, makes the promise to end this practice by starting with his family, an ending which some might consider unrealistic, even too simplistic. Does Yerima choose this finale because he aims to evoke an emotional response from his audience, thus sweeping them up in a positive movement for change? Alternatively, could Yerima be accused of being unrealistically optimistic that this practice will stop? These questions are difficult to answer. My reading of this resolution is that it works as a rallying cry from the playwright, a call for change which seeks to inspire and admonish a younger generation of men to denounce these oppressive gender practices in the hopes that a free and equal gender regime will emerge. In this way, Yerima's play *Aetu* takes up a number of social issues pertaining to traditional Yoruba beliefs by exposing the motives behind the establishment of these traditions and revealing their benefits for men. It also addresses the fact that many of the negative judgments made about women are deeply rooted in cultural beliefs, beliefs which the play attempts to challenge. In employing the words of Old Woman to call for an end to such practices, the play undermines the sense and logic behind them and hopes or calls for an ending to such practices.

Aetu's tragic experiences can be seen as a necessary rite of passage in order to inaugurate change. On the other hand, her death can also be preventable because she would not have had to sacrifice herself if those traditions were not in place. One could argue that Yerima choses a particularly extreme, even improbable, example to illustrate this point. This extreme example one would say could draw the attention of the perpetrators of these traditional practices to the harm and hurt these practices bestows on the victims (women).

Using the educative and insightful agent of drama, Yerima tells a story that is based on an historical event, namely the experiences of the playwright's maternal grandmother. Here, one could suggest that the playwright's partial adoption of a factual history is likely to engage his audience in ways that a fictional story might not. In this sense, the dramatic enactment of this biography assists in the sense-making process thus facilitating introspection and community reflection. In this story, the playwright engages his audience not only by representing Yoruba traditional culture as oppressive to women but also by exploring its damaging effects on an individual life. As it turns out, the play was remarkably prescient about events which were to shake the Nigerian cabinet and the country as a whole. On the 17th of July 2013, Senator Ahmed Yerima, unfortunately a name-sake of the playwright, after having married a thirteen-year-old girl, decided to go to the national assembly with a proposition requesting that the marriageable age of a girl be shifted from eighteen to thirteen. The proposition was thrown out into and Senator Ahmed Yerima and his supporters were disgraced. But the sagacity of this playwright and his ability to see and write about this even before it happened has earned him accolades from many quarters.

Aetu's resolution seem to synchronize or align with the gender theories of African womanism and nego-feminism, both of which embrace accommodation, tolerance, negotiation and gender unity for the purpose of general growth of both genders. The way Old Woman is able to convince Kande that he and other men should tolerate and accommodate one another fits into Nnaemeka's ideal that "through negotiations and compromise", gender inequality and patriarchy in the African cultural and social system could be eradicated. By adhering to the African concept of feminism, *Aetu*, like the works of Emecheta, Tlali and others, rejects the radicalist ideal of challenging patriarchy as proposed by radical western feminists. While the play's exploration of feminism can be termed Afro-centric, its exploration of gender and women's oppression rightly contradicts gender critics like Odeyemi and Oyewumi who present pre-colonial African culture as gender

neutral. *Aetu* offers a clear and unambiguous condemnation of the different kinds of culturally oppressive practices that it explores, and these practices can be traced to the pre-colonial period. According to Osanyemi & Adedeji, "with dramatic aesthetics and dexterity, [*Aetu*] portrays the pathetic and helpless state of womanhood under the firm grip of patriarchal hegemony and neurosis of tradition of inheritance in African culture" (2017:113).

If we look at the play from the western feminist perspective, Aetu's curse on these men could also be described as a radical feminist action. Having suggested that the play's resolution is African feminist ideologically, I also consider her curse on these men as a radical move. Because of her gender and age, Aetu cannot engage these men in physical battle, but her decision to invite a higher spiritual power to fight her battle for her is radical and therefore, could be aligned with radical feminism. If eradicating patriarchy for Aetu means committing suicide, and incurring curses on her perpetrator, I consider these actions anti-accommodationist, non-negotiating and lacking compromise which are the hallmarks of African womanist theories. Therefore, I suggest that the play blends both western feminism and Afro-centric feminist theories to explore the question on gender inequality in the Yoruba culture. By doing so, Yerima takes issue with the school of thought in Nigerian feminist/postcolonial criticism that link gender oppressive practices to the arrival of colonialism.

The play's exploration of the complexity of women's views on gender is also worthy of comment. What I have in mind here are the conservative attitudes expressed by Aetu, the chief victim of oppression about the weakness of women's attitudes which are also articulated alongside an outright refusal of traditional cultural norms. By agreeing that the woman is "weak", Aetu appears to embrace and accept a subordinate status. However, what the play also highlights is the paradox that while accepting women's weakness, she continues to make statements which present men as the oppressive agent in the life of women. What one could infer from this contradictory position is that the position of woman in the society continues to be a highly contested debate not only between men and women, but between women themselves. In this sense, the play gives space to the complexity of the topic, engaging a variety of contradictory views about the position of women in Nigerian society. What can be said with certainty is that the play's conclusion is straight and direct: let every norm, practice and establishment which tends to inhibit gender inequality be abolished and let everyone, male or female, be treated equally.

The reading of this play shows how the playwright invokes aesthetical nuances of the Yoruba culture to drive home its message: the way he explores traditional issues in a socio-political dimension is worthy of mention. The cruel and abusive practices highlighted in this study are traditional, yet, the play satirizes them by expanding them to political spaces. His treatment of girlchild marriage and rape are brought forward through a tradition within the country, yet he is able to speak to the entire nation as these are not only national concerns but global. In another vein, the play's exploration of masculinity and femininity is one that deviates partially from the more traditionally rooted definitions. Oke's and Olori Ebi's displays of masculinity is condemned conspicuously. While the definition of a womanhood and femininity is presented to be complex and relative. This suggests that the play does not completely support or negate a certain definition of femininity. However, it does consider subjugation, oppression and abuse of women as perpetuated by culture, as hindering to their freedom, growth and sense of completeness. To achieve this position of womanhood and femininity, the play employs the simultaneous roles both western and Afro-centric feminisms to explore what form of gender oppressions are instituted by culture and how victims have resisted. This means that the play portends that both gender ideologies, often considered contrasting can find a mutual ground where they can speak to identical issues either differently or in unity.

CHAPTER THREE: MASCULINITY, WAR, NEGO-FEMINISM AND ECOFEMINISM IN AHMED YERIMA'S *LITTLE DROPS*

As I stated earlier, this research focuses on exploring various cultural practices in Nigeria and South Africa which establish and encourage gender inequality. In particular, the thesis seeks to identify, highlight, interpret and analyse the different ways in which gender is negotiated in selected Nigerian and South African plays. In my analysis of Yerima's *Aetu,* the definition of culture was narrowed to the traditional tenets and practices of the Yoruba people. But for the purpose of this chapter, culture is understood more broadly and wholistically as the way of life of a people. As highlighted by Michael Omolewa, "culture is everything that characterizes a society such as language, technological artefacts, skills, knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, attitudes, ideas, behaviours, laws, traditions, customs, and values" (2007:600). It also follows Dutch sociologist Gerard Hofstede's definition of culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another" (1980, 21-23). It is thus established that any habit acquired and displayed by a particular group can be seen as the culture of that group. In this chapter therefore, there is a movement outside these traditional and religious aspects of culture to broader social and political landscapes. *Little Drops* focuses on those socio-economic and political aspects of culture which tend to see women as subservient to men. In this chapter, I will draw on this broader, more inclusive understanding of culture in order to pursue an analysis of gendered oppression in Yerima's 2009 play, *Little Drops*.

I have selected this play because, like most of Yerima's plays, it deals with present-day socio-cultural concerns within a specific crisis ridden geographical part of the country in this case, the Niger Delta. The play is of particular interest because it explores women's perception of, reactions to war, the effects of war, and the construction of 'masculinities' and femininity' with patriarchal focus on war. The problems presented in the play originate from poor resource control resulting from government's extraction of oil in the Niger Delta region. In brief, this part of the nation supplies the largest percentage of crude oil for exportation but, ironically, the dwellers of this region lack basic amenities. The lack of basic amenities and the destruction of water and agricultural land, resulting from oil extraction have resulted in various protests against the government. While depicting the plight of locals in the area and the various events that have taken place, Yerima presents these events from the perspective of the women involved. That is, he privileges the female perspective, this is a standpoint which is rarely considered either by the

government, the various men involved or those who have explored the Niger Delta crisis. In the analysis of this play, I shall examine the kinds of gender roles and identities presented in the play. To do this, I will interpret and analyse the standpoints of male and female characters toward this crisis and the ways in which the play dramatises these perceptions.

To properly engage this play, a detailed contextual and sociological information regarding the setting of the play must be well provided. Jeremiah Methuselah points out that the population of the Niger Delta people is in the region of thirty-one million (2014). This figure represents over 15% percent of the entire population of the country which, according to the 2017 National Population Commission posted on the commission's website is estimated to be 182 million people. Over 70% of the people living in the region are poor, which is why this is one of the poorest regions in the country. Augustine Ikelegbe observes that by the 1990s, the region had become "one of the least developed and poorest" in the country (2005:214). Joseph Ebegbulem, Dickson Ekpe and Theophilus Oyime Adejusmo als corrobates this claim by observing that "the region remains the poorest [in the country] due largely to the ecologically unfriendly exploitation of oil and state policies that expropriate the indigenous peoples of the niger delata of their rights to these natural resources" (2013:279). As a result of frustration coming from lack, dwellers, especially male have been driven to taking up arms and engaging in interminable conflicts in their attempts to get what they claim they deserve from the federal government.

In addition to the dreadful security threat that the Islamic sectarian group, Boko Haram, poses to the lives of humans in Nigeria, the violence that takes place in the Niger Delta as a result of oil extraction is another source of death and property destruction that the government has to combat. As a country, Nigeria is divided into six geo-political zones, namely North-East, North-West, North-Central, South-South, South-East, and South-West. This geo-political division was created for many reasons, to foster unity and equality in the distribution of financial resources and the second, in order to represent these regions at the federal levels of political spaces. Of all these regions, the South-South, which includes the Niger Delta, supplies the largest chunk of earnings from oil exportation. Statistical records show that, since 1975, the Niger Delta has accounted for over 75% of Nigeria's earnings in export. According to drama critic, Jeremiah Methuselah Samuel, "the [Niger Delta] region accounts for over 90 percent of Nigeria's proven gas and oil reserves. Proven gas resources were 4.502 trillion (cu m) in 2005 and proven oil resources were 36 billion

(cu m) in 2003". Going further and more explicitly, he states that Niger Delta alone "fuels Nigeria's heavily oil-dependent economy and accounts for 95% of Nigeria's export earnings and over 80% of Federal Government revenue" (2014:11). This statistical fact perfectly establishes the importance of the Niger Delta for the sustenance and maintenance of the Nigerian economy. As stated earlier, the miserable irony of this situation is that the people of this region, popularly known as 'Niger Deltans', are one of the poorest people in the country. Despite the abundance of wealth generated from their region as the statistical fact above have presented, dwellers struggle for basic survival. As Kuru, the only male character in *Little Drops* (2009) attests: "All we are asking for is the development of the Niger Delta region". He continues by saying, "we are the owners of the raw materials, but we don't have a say in the sharing. Because of this there is poverty and mass unemployment" (112).

A further complication is that the ecosystem from which about 70 percent of the Niger Delta population get their daily living has been endangered as a result of the various activities of oil extractors. A recent report made available by the United Nations (UN) states due to the devastating effects of the activities carried out by Shell BP – a multinational oil company which has been extracting crude oil, oil and gas from this region since the last fifty years - it will take another twenty to thirty-five years for a better ecosystem to be restored (Vidal, 2001). However, this will take place only if spillage from oil extraction ceases.

Having established who the Niger Delta people are, and what they face, it is necessary to discuss their reactions to the struggles they go through. Isaac Newton's third law of motion states that, "for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction" (Newton, 1689). According to Lois McNay, "repression produces its own resistances" (1994:39). What this means is that, as reasoning beings, humans are bound to react to situations that threaten them. And when there is threat to human life, humans are involuntarily forced to respond to the situation. Violence is the predominant form of reaction from the people of the Niger Delta especially from the youth. Andy Afinotan and Victor Ojakorotu observe that: "the [Niger Delta] area … [is] a hot bed of violence, insurgency, kidnapping, hostage-taking, oil pipeline sabotage, crude oil theft, gang wars, internecine struggles and so much else by way of anarchy and chaoses" (2009:191). Jeremiah Methuselah also makes the same observation:

> Economic emasculation of these people through environmental degradation and oil pollution has, in the last four decades or so, bred hostilities, militancy and violence in this region. This has manifested either through milder civil disobedience to more sinister and militant activism of youths who have organized themselves into guerrilla groups attacking oil installations, killing and maiming personnel of various oil companies. (2014:77)

Drama critic, Julius-Adeoye Rantimi admits that, "the reason for the agitation in the region is deprivation and poverty amidst its plenty oil and gas resources" (2011:3-4). In a similar spirit, Ikelegbe Augustine records that the

> Niger Delta is today a region of intense hostilities, violent confrontations and criminal violence. It is pervaded by a proliferation of arms and institutions and agencies of violence ranging from Nigerian Armed Forces to community, ethnic and youth militias, armed gangs and networks, pirates, cultists and robbers (2005:209).

Whether or not these reactions/responses are "equal and opposite" to those meted by the government and extractors who benefits majorly and directly from this environmental degradation is yet another discussion.

The cause and effect, action and reaction sequence that transpires between government, multinational companies and the Niger Delta people means that the nation will continue to see the populace take action in their fight to get basic demands. This incessant crisis has made the government adopt the 'carrot and stick' control method in order to curtail the activities of the militants, efforts which so far have yielded little success. The Joint Task Force (JTF), a military task force and other police and military forces have engaged these militants on many occasions but, rather than achieving meaningful success, lives and property continue to be lost. This has led to the government's decision to declare amnesty and to promise jobs and pay some money as a form of compensation to these indigenes. However, due to corruption, mismanagement and lack of transparency on the sides of the government and representatives of these residents, this effort has done little to alleviate the plight of the people and so the problem persists. The nation continues to lose billions of monies as a result of the militants' activities in the region.

Continuing in this vein of protest and violent reaction, Asari Dokubo, who was the president of the Ijaw Youth Council (IYC) – an association founded to fight against poor resource control in the region and also founder of the Niger Delta People Volunteer Force (the most influential armed group operating in the Niger Delta region) - pugnaciously declared that, "there is nothing wrong

if I take the crude oil found in our land, refine it and sell it to our people ... The real bunkerers are the federal government, which has been stealing oil from Ijawland since 1958" (Dokubo, 2004). In this way, Dokubo advises his fellow militias to continue in the destruction of pipelines, abductions and assassinations of experts, and to engage in incessant wars with the federal government in order to get what they understand belongs to them. It is also worth stating upfront that these violent activities are carried out largely by men, but that the victims are largely women and children. For instance, the majority of the women of the region depends solely on the environment for their survival. Their means of livelihood are through fishing or fish selling, farming and the trading of these farm products. But the oil spilling activities and ecosystem contamination has had devastating effect on the living conditions of these women and their ability to earn a living. As mentioned earlier, it is from the viewpoint of the woman/female that this crisis is presented in the play.

Gendered Dimensions of Conflict

The one-act play *Little Drops*, is the second of a trilogy of narratives on the present conflict ravaging the Niger Delta region of the South-South geo-political zone of Nigeria. The play won the first runner's-up for the 2010 Nigerian Prize for Literature sponsored by the Nigeria Liquefied Natural Gas (NLNG) company just four years after his previous play on the same topic, *Hard Ground*, had won the first prize. The third of the trilogy on the same topic, *Ipomu*, was published in 2011. Yerima's ability and innovativeness in drawing attention to the gender dimension of the struggle makes it even more significant. Since its publication, *Little Drops* has been staged numerous times and on different stages within the country. In 2016, for instance, in various performances to mark the International Women's Day, it toured three different cities of Port Harcourt, Benin and Calabar - all cities in the Niger Delta region. The play has received positive responses. Responding to a performance of the play on the 3rd of April 2016, Mrs Ibim Seminitari, Acting Managing Director of the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) describes the play as exploring an ongoing theme "in national discourse, demanding and requiring healing. We must also begin to think more on helping to rebuild the lives of women and children who are unscripted victims of the conflicts in the Niger Delta" (*The Theatre Times*, 2016, online). She also goes further to point out that the play was written and performed at no better time "than now when

the region is faced with increasing spate of violence" and that it supports the "on-going campaign by the commission (NNDC) [which] should go beyond the elite to the grassroots – schools, communities where the unemployed youths are recruited for different crimes and criminalities". These commentaries identify the importance of the playwright as a 'mirror' who re-presents the events in society from a particular perspective. While the commentaries made above come from a political figure, his plays have also been popular among ordinary theatre goers because his style and language are accessible to readers of all levels. Other aspects of his aesthetics are that the play is polemical, has a political purpose, employs 'magical realist' elements and adopts linear chronology. As in his other plays, even though he writes in English, he employs the nuances and gestures component of the culture or society he explores.

The play begins at a river bank at the home of an agile, seventy-year-old woman: Memekize. She has been living at the river bank for a long period of time partly because of the nature of her job (fishing and fish selling) and partly due to her inability to get a house in the city. Her family consisting of her husband and her two sons, have all been killed as a result of a previous crisis in the region. Because of this crisis, Memekize devises a means by which to protect herself and survive the violent nature of the area. She wears trousers, a hoodie jacket and carries a big cooking spoon which is wrapped in a black cloth to look like a big gun. She uses her appearance as a man and the semblance of a weapon to frighten away intruders who attempt to encroach on her home which the stage direction describes as "a small shed" at the riverbank. When the play begins, she has been there alone for a long time and therefore has been given different names such as witch, healer, and old woman. On this day in the Gbarambatu community, as other days of persistent war, Memekize is at her shed when a noticeably frightened woman runs in.

Mukume, a newlywed bride, has been running away from rioters in the Gbarambatu community until she gets to the shed where she hopes to find rest. As Memekize notices her, she comes out dressed as a gangster and carries her gun-like spoon to frighten her. This newlywed bride, whose husband had just been murdered as a result of the on-going crisis, is frightened by Memekize's appearance and her threat to kill her. But after agonizingly narrating her painful ordeal at the hands of military personnel who have on successive occasions subjected her to war rape, she is embraced by Memekize who also reveals that she is neither a man nor a militant but an old woman who uses the disguise to protect herself. As the two women talk, Mumuke falls asleep. At this point, another

woman, Azue, the queen of the Gbaramatu kingdom comes in holding a baby. Azue goes on to narrate her ordeal, how her husband, the king, had been murdered by rioters because of his shady dealings with the government. The king had supported the militants in their fight against the government but had also doubled up as a government spy. The militants murdered him and set the palace on fire but Azue is able to escape to the riverbank where she finds Memekize and Mukume. As they speak of their individual and collective plights as individuals and as women, Azue makes a horrific realization that the child on her back is dead, he had been shot as she ran through the street to the riverbank.

At this point in the play, a professional teacher Bonuwo, a woman in her mid-forties, is introduced as she comes to join the three women before her. She had been chased from town by an angry mob. This is because, out of her love and commitment to her job, she had let the pupils between the ages of seven and eight come to school when the parents thought it was not safe. The classroom where the pupils were seated had been bombed when Bonuwo went to use the bathroom and all the pupils, forty-one of them, were killed. She escaped the wrath of the parents by running to the river bank. The four women continue to recount their various ordeals at the hands of the boys and men as the crisis continue to escalate. At the end of this talk among the women, Memekize, Azue and Bonuwo go into the shed while Mukume remains outside. Then, the first male in the play (in ghost-form) is introduced.

While the three other women are asleep and Mukume is watching over them, we see the ghost of her late husband, Ovievie, appear to her. He confesses his involvement in the riots and explains why he could not protect her when she was raped repeatedly. In a scene that establishes the selfishness of men, we see the dead husband inviting his wife to sacrifice her life, so they could continue their relationship in the afterlife. Yerima introduces this selfish propensity of men in order to bring out his idea of male narcissism and to emphasize the privileged social position they hold, one which allows them to establish norms and rules in their favour. As he continues to pester her to join him to return to the home of the dead, Memekize wakes up from sleep to support her and to reject him. Ovievie leaves after Memekize's intervention. This gesture accentuates the importance of unity, sisterhood and togetherness in what has become a camp of women, one which provides them with protection. It is also a moment when dominant gender ideals are successfully resisted. At the disappearance of the ghost, the only living male in the story, Kuru, is introduced.

Kuru's purpose of coming into this space is somewhat different from the women who came desperate for help. His entrance, as reader discovers, is to dominate and perpetuate his masculinity on the women he finds there.

Kuru, one of the fiercest militants finds himself at the riverbank where the women are gathered and threatens to kill them all. At this point, Kuru has lost a lot of blood from gunshot wounds. Upon getting there, after making various threats and attempting to intimidate the women, he falls helplessly to the ground from loss of blood. Using their numerical advantage after having taken care of him and being in custody of his fire arms, the women, led by Memekize, make him promise to abandon violence, let peace reign within the region and promise to send the message of peace to his fellow fighters. The women then dress him in beautiful apparel that belonged to Memekize's late husband and he is allowed to leave for the city. All the women, except Memekize leave the shed for the city to live a peaceful life. As Memekize states, "I have all I need here. And besides, my home is here … remember? (115). At this juncture, the play ends.

Women "shedding little drops of tears, of blood, of ogogoro and of rain"

I begin the analysis of the play by reiterating the poignant comment made by the playwright in his author's note where he describes "the people who touch [his] heart and draw [him] so close towards shedding little drops of tears", these women "in their uniquely fearsome life, they shed more … of blood … of ogogoro … of rain … and of life. And yet sadly, no one … talks about them. They are the women" (2009:65). Couple with his claim that women are people who touch Yerima's heart, he also argues that the need to "talk about them" also necessitated the writing of the play. Here, Yerima does not suggest that there is a dearth of writing about women and their plight. Rather, he insinuates that despite the fact that there is so much clamour against women's subjugation in Nigerian society and globally, the world is still far from achieving what Jerrold Hogle calls "post-patriarchy" (1988:99), a world devoid of gender inequality. In a recent global study published by the World Economic Forum in 2015, it was reported that "it will take another 118 years to close the gap in health, education, economic opportunity and politics between both genders" (online, visited June 2017). The WEF's report suggests that position change might come in the distant future, but it does not cover every aspect of human endeavour amongst which is culture which has

the quality of being dynamic yet enduring. In the context of this play therefore, the question of gender is being explored from extreme circumstances – circumstances of war, conflict and dilemma. Therefore, Yerima's concern is not only for the temporary, he looks beyond the present world of academia and activism to imagine a better future for everyone. In this chapter, I will adopt character-by-character analysis so that the nuances of gender ideologies exhibited by these characters can be expounded. The first character to be explored here is the oldest woman and the first character to be introduced in the play Memekize which I will hereafter refer to as Meme

'Manning Up': Memekize's Survival Instinct

Meme is an elderly widow of seventy years who, like all other female characters in the play, is a victim of war created by selfish men and who, as a result, has lost husband, children and property. All through the play, Meme represents the prompt or cue from where other female and the male characters involved in the play take their action. In addition, her home is where all the actions in the play takes place. Mukume, another victim of the conflict, addresses her in the following way:

> I have heard so much about you. Your story spreads all over the creeks. The old woman who lives by the riverbanks. Wonderful things … magical powers … how you can heal people … even raise the dead … speak with the dead as if they are living … but by the gods … now seeing you … meeting you like this … forgive me … you look so simple … so normal … so ordinary … so kind. (73)

What these words suggest is that despite having been condemned to live as a widow without family and kin, Memekize is known far in the city and beyond for her kindness, spiritual powers and humanity. This identity precedes her so much that when these fellow women victims get to her creek, they feel comfortable and at home with her and thus, readily narrate their horrible ordeals at the hands of men. Telling of her own ordeal and loss, Meme recounts, "All my blood. My husband and my two sons. They all perished the same day. During the Biafran war" (58). As she recounts the sad events that led to her complete lost and the resultant to her loneliness. In this way, she draws attention to another political conflict – the Biafran civil war – and its devastating effects on women.

The over thirty-month long civil war called the Biafran war is the first and only Nigerian civil war to date. The war was fought by a secessionist state within the country – the Igbo people against

the Nigerian government between 1967 and 1970. Among many reasons for the war was the agitation against the Nigerian government which was controlled almost absolutely by the northerners. Led by Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu and his compatriots, the Biafran soilders were defeated by the Nigerian nation. Yerima's allusion to this bloody war is meant to remind his audience of the effects of previous wars and to warn them of the destructive consequences of warfare. Being a survivor of this Biafran war, Meme's knowledge and experience is second to none. Therefore, she is presented as both a survivor and a figure of wisdom. She continues her story,

> That year had started well. It was a good season of lobsters and prawns that year. Benikurukuru, the river goddess had smiled on us that year. The fish was in abundance. It was so good … I would find myself in the little canoe going to the market up to three times a day. Unknown to us, there was war. How were we to know in this swampy bush? As they jumped in and out of the river, diving … checking the nets … dugum! A shell. It tore them to pieces I never picked one complete. I found a head there … a limb here … a toe … a finger … manacled trunks in the rain, I picked each piece until I had each wooden box full (88).

In this statement, Meme narrates the incident that led to the tragic loss of her family. Through the use of the diction "shell" - which stands as a metonym for bomb or explosive - and the onomatopoeic representation of the incident with the use of the expression "dugum" - which presents the sudden appearance of war in their lives – Yerima underscores the incomprehensibility and devastation of the war for people like Meme who have no interest in it.

The record of human loss in the Biafran war was almost three million Nigerians. This includes those who died as a result of military conflict as well as those who died from starvation and disease. For Meme, this war has rendered her almost useless even handicapped: now she is old and can no longer get into the river to get fish as she used to. This story of the effect of war on women forms the crux of this play. What is emphasized is how decisions taken by men often reverberate negatively on women who have very little interest in these events. At the death of her family, Meme is left behind to suffer alone as a result of the selfish decisions of men who decided through violence that Biafra should be cut out of Nigeria.

From the first stage direction of the play, the state of Meme's home is vividly presented as "a cleared space by the riverbank. A swampy forest … there is a small shed which is home to

Memekize" (67). This description of her home leads to several questions: why does she live there alone? How safe is it? Since the house is by the riverside, Meme has access to the river goddess, Benikurukuru, to whom she prays and from whom she gets protection and strength. Because of her belief in the river goddess, the shed at the riverbank gives her a spiritual advantage over other women who come to join her. What is also evident from these details is that Meme is a strong woman. The bravery she has developed by living alone at the riverbank, coupled with her wisdom as an old woman, have given her insight into the problems and concerns of the community. In addition, as a result of her relationship with Benikurukuru, Meme is able to devise a solution to the crisis explored in the play. Yerima's use of Meme as the anchor-person and lead character in the play who also proffers solution to the war within the region has significance for the play's treatment of gender. The prominence of this old woman in the play and the fact that she instigates a solution to the crisis suggests that Yerima gives important roles to women in finding a solution to the actual Niger Delta crisis.

An important feature of masculinist attitude that the play presents is the fact that Meme's survival depends on her ability to impersonate men. Through Meme's devised means of survival, the play buttresses a general saying that when hard times comes, irrespective of their gender, one has to 'man up'. This survival strategy is interesting because it both confirms the connection between men and violence and at the same time undermines it. Through Meme's 'manning up', she 'performs' or behaves male-like, thereby, undermining the understanding of gender as being binary opposite. It also alludes with De Beauvoir's argument that one is not born, but rather, becomes, a woman (1949). As the most important character in the play, Meme's role as a peace-maker is confirmed by her ability to mend the hearts of the oppressed and to restore peace to the downtrodden. Through the availability of her shed as a home and venue for peace resolution, her soothing and propitiating words and her final strategic method of crisis resolution, Meme becomes the medium through which peace is restored to the kingdom of Gbarambatu. The play presents a paradox of a woman who is threatened by violence, yet, instrumental to bringing peace.

Another aspect of gender concern presented by the play through Meme's characterization is the idea (supported by African womanism) that women are the spiritual strength of a home. For instance, speaking of the Yoruba culture, Olugboyega Alaba notes that the Yoruba "males derive spiritual power from the females" (2004:7). Meme's continuous reverence and prayers to

Benikurukuru, the river goddess corroborates Alaba's comment. Through Meme's affiliation to Benikurukuru, her life has been kept well long enough to stand a recourse for fellow troubled women and to recommend a peaceful and all-accommodating resolution to the crisis engulfing Gbarambatu kingdom.

Mukume: War and Rape

Mukume is another example of female strength and resilience in the play, this is despite various forms of patriarchal oppression she experiences. Mukume is introduced as a woman in distress. She "runs in" to Meme's shed "frightened" as a result of her immediate experience. This fear is made worse when she gets into Meme's shed because, Meme, (dressed as a man) intimidates her with a facsimile of a gun. At the peak of this fright, Mukume begins to narrate her ordeal to Meme hoping that she can gain her sympathy and thus, avoids rape or murder. Still in her guise as a man, Meme commands her to bend down and touch her toes which awkwardly reminds her of the previous rapes she had experienced. This prompts the conversation between them:

> Mukume: No, but please, I am all sore.
>
> Meme: Sore?
>
> Mukume: Yes, Please! I have been raped three times today already. Kill me instead. Shoot me and let me die (crying.) No, I will not let another man touch me again. Kill me first.
>
> Meme: Shut up …
>
> Mukume: Shoot me. Kill me. Rape me after. But not when I am alive. I say kill me. (68)

In this short dialogue, Mukume, the newly-wed, describes her experience with the government's military men who are in the city engaging in a battle with the militants. She is caught and raped by three military men. In this way, Yerima introduces and critiques another concern that is prevalent during the times of war, namely, rape. Impassive men who tend to have the 'power of protection' over women, because they are according to Connell, the gatekeepers of patriarchy', use this period of war and power of maelstrom to engage in various criminal activities such as theft, bully and rape. By introducing this violent act of rape, the play touches on what scholars such as Charlotte Hooper (1999), Terry Kupers (2005) describe as toxic masculinity. According to Kupers, toxic masculinity is "the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to

foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence" (2005:713). Writing about toxic masculinity and the US military, Hooper argues that, "military service is the fullest expression of masculinity" (1999:64). Both Hooper's and Kupers' arguments align with the concept of war and rape which the play explores. In the context of *Little Drops*, the abuse of these women come from the men who have been employed and paid to protect them. These tropes of protection and violence are important in the play. While Mukume lies unconscious and exhausted, Meme cleans her body and her genitals as well. While doing this, Meme perceives what she describes as "smells of bruised flesh and wet blood, all mingled in one marshy paste of pain" (69). For Meme, Mukume has been "mashed up into paste. Like hawks, they [military men/rapists] pecked everywhere" (69-70). Meme's description of Mukume's rape presents an image of butchering. The use of phrases such as "smell of bruised flesh and wet blood" suggests the cutting and butchering of an animal, suggesting the consequence of toxic masculinity as both physical and psychological. Mukume's rape does not only bring physical damage to her body, but it also results in psychological and emotional trauma.

Going further, the play engages with traditional ideals of femininity, namely, the excessive emphasis on sexual chastity and various permutations of violent masculinities under the guise of protection. As the play suggests, the society is dominated by cultural and religious norms which values women based on their virtue and chastity. Mukume knows that she has lost this virtue and, rather than continue to experience this fate, she would prefer to die. It is not surprising that Mukume sees this as the loss of her virtue because of the societal emphasis on female virtue and chastity. Affirming the objectifying role given to women as the enforcers of patriarchal values, Mukume agrees that she has lost her virtue from this act of molestation. She says to Meme after she finally wakes up from her unconscious state and discovering that Meme had cleaned her up:

> Mukume: You have seen me.
>
> Meme: Hmmm?
>
> Mukume: Down there … where my virtue once lived. Tell me mother, will I ever be the same again? I … we just got married four days ago. Ovievie, my husband has only just given me this wedding ring and vowed to treasure and please me till death do us part (she begins to cry). He always said that my body was his temple. They have trampled upon my virtue, turned my passage to a marshy swampy ground, and my soul lost, full of shame and pity. (73-74)

The subject of female chastity and virtue rather than male sexual 'virtue' is of great interest in this play. Men determine for women what is virtuous and what is decent. Women's failure to meet up with these standards bring shame and disgrace upon them. This aligns De Beauvoir's remarks on the emphasis which is placed on women's bodies in patriarchal societies. Their bodies thus, become a prison rather than an instrument they can use as they please. This is why Mukume asks if she will "ever remain the same again?" She understands the implication the rape will have on her and what the society would think of her. She thus, foresees the stigmatization she would forever go through at the hands of her husband and the society. Mukume is divided between whether to wish her husband dies from the war to prevent the shame and rejection that will come upon her or for him to live because she needs her husband as her marriage is only four days old. The stigma and shame that awaits her at the loss of her virtue is more worrying and important to her than the physical pain of successive rape. She discusses this confusion with Meme

> Mukume: If he is dead, I will know as his wife, won't I?
>
> Meme: Hmmm?
>
> Mukume: My husband. If he is dead, I will know, won't I?
>
> Meme: Now, don't say such things. He will not die. Benikurukuru forbid!
>
> Mukume: (Takes a mat, spreads it and lies on it) I must tell him how I lost my virtue, and he was not even there to defend me. By the gods, Mama … how do I tell him? Heh, Ayiba save me. With his temper, he will cut off my head before he hears my story. But it was not my fault, was it? … I swear they would have killed me. (Pause) But if Ovievie is dead … haa … that is a different story altogether. I will know if he is dead, won't I?
>
> Meme: Do you want him dead?
>
> Mukume: To lock up my shame? Yes. (Pauses) … (74-75).

Coupled with the shame of rape, Mukume also suggests that her husband may react with violence, again, suggesting that violence is pervasive. In this case however, to avoid degradation and shame if not punishment, Mukume would rather have her husband dead to "lock up her shame". This means that she prefers to be a widow after only four days of marriage rather than have her husband alive to judge and castigate her. Fortunately for her, her husband dies in the war due to his corrupt and fraudulent practice in relation to oil theft and for his support of the opposing side of the fighting camp. The depiction of Mukume's trauma is significant because it highlights the ubiquity of rape in the periods of war. It also highlights the dominant construction of masculinity as toxic and

shows the negative effects on women. Another point that Mukume's experience highlights is the question of female chastity and the shame of sexual violation. Women are demanded to be virtuous, yet, they are violated by men who demand such virtue.

Azue: Toxic Masculinity, Women's Shame

While Memekize, Mukume and Bonuwo are ordinary citizens of the kingdom, Azue is the queen. She becomes the next character to join the two women at the riverbank shed. She is the queen and the mother of the heir to the throne of the kingdom whom she is carrying on her back as she makes towards Memekize's shed. Azue had lived in opulence and abundance without having to bother with the ongoing oil-related crisis until she too is affected by it. Until she describes herself as the queen, Azue is introduced in the stage direction simply as a "young woman". The introduction of Azue, is thus as an ordinary character not different from others. The implication is that whatever the status of a woman, she is not excluded from patriarchy. The reader observes that Azue is bound by the same chauvinistic and patriarchal strictures that non-royal women endure. In this play, all the women are equal in the struggle for emancipation and therefore are treated as equal victims of patriarchy.

To describe how and why her husband lost his life, Azue says "they cut off the head of the king right in front of his family" (78). This is due to his selfish and treacherous behaviour. This is figurative of the habit of many Nigerian leaders and politicians, the king is the one who aims to satisfy his selfish desires without necessarily caring about the masses and the poor who support them. The king had claimed to be in support of the Niger Delta militants and, yet, he is a friend of the government. This provokes the militants who have him brutally killed. Describing the incident that led to his murder, Azue says: "first, the boys came and drank and ate. They danced and chanted his praise. They left driving like wild animals. Then came the government boys. Again, they drank and ate with him. Leaving bags of money in the palace (78). The king's act of disloyalty is once again criticized in the play. When the militants realize their king's double-dealings, they visit his home and have him killed. However, as in *Aetu* where Aetu and the other two wives are accused of the death of their husband, Azue is confronted with similar scenario, albeit, from fellow women.

The rumour circulating the kingdom is that Azue is the king's murderer. Before Azue introduces herself as the queen, Meme discusses the event of the king's death:

> We heard [the king's] new wife pushed him. Urged on by her evil mother. We even heard that he had taken her from the hand of a youth leader, who had sworn to take her back with his last breath. And then he tried to please her with all he had. Buy her love. He sent his three wives packing … Their only crime was that they all had female children […] Now see what she had done. Pushing the man to an early death. She was his honey-pot of death and shame! (80)

Meme's speech highlights the pervasive issue of wife-accusation; it also offers a negative view of normative femininity as corrupt and vicious as women conspire together to damn other women. Meme's speech also highlights the conventional preference for the male child over the female as well as the practice of polygamy and the chasing away of wives by husbands whenever they deem fit. When Meme discovers that her accusations are invalid, she apologizes. However, the patriarchal domination and women's complicity with patriarchy has been established through this character. Even though elderly and wise, Meme still functions as an instrument in propagating men's values. This suggests that women play important roles as agents for the reproduction of patriarchal values and in reinforcing views of women as 'evil' and murderous.

Bonuwo: The Double Faces of Oppression

The idea of double oppression pointed out here is different from the oppression of the female gender resulting from her race and gender, 'being black and female' argued by (Frances Beale 1970), but one that arrives from being female and ostracized by one's society consisting of male and female. Bonuwo is a primary school teacher in Gbarambatu kingdom. Her oppression as a woman affected by war is doubled by the fact that she is ostracized from the kingdom for having allowed her pupils to go to school during the period of war. Her ostracism comes from the fact that she had allowed her pupils to go to school during this period of war and all pupils get killed from a blast in their school.

The fourth and last female character to be studied in this play, Bonuwo is the last woman to join the group at the riverbank. She is a woman in her mid-forties and a school teacher. Like others, she is of the Gbaramatu kingdom from whence she is running. The continuous "running" is an

effective metaphor which suggests the extent to which women have been made to be runners in their own homes. They have been made uncomfortable in the spaces that men and patriarchy have assigned them to. As Azue says, "I am Azue, we are all running from the boys …" (92). Exhausted and hungry from her running from town to the riverbank, Bonuwo tries to take a bite from the water yam that is being roasted by the other women who at this time, are hiding inside the shed. Meme appears disguised as a man holding her make-believe gun and threatens Bonuwo. Before she gets there, Bonuwo slumps on to the mat. She narrates her ordeal:

> My name is Bonuwo Karamo. I stay in the village near Camp Five in Gbaramatu Kingdom. I am a teacher. I teach at the Urban Day School. Monday, like any other day in school. Then we heard a few gun shots and some shells exploding. It all sounded very normal, so we continued with our school work. We were prepared as we heard of the attack on Camp Iroko a day before. At the staff meeting, the Head Teacher had made us go through our crisis handling procedure. How to close down the school, and take the children to safety spot. I had taught all morning when I had this headache and wanted to use the toilet. I asked all my primary two students, all children between the ages of seven and eight to sleep. (92-93)

Bonuwo describes the bombing in the kingdom as normal and typical. This means that this has become what they are accustomed to. And to manage the situation, teachers and students as young as seven and eight years old have been taught how to run to safety by their teachers. This is also true of the Niger Delta region, where young children of similar ages or little older have been so involved in the war that they carry guns about and are deeply involved in militant activities.

Again, in describing the damage that was done to the body of the bombed children, Yerima uses similar images to those he used to present the rape of Mukume. Bonuwo says:

> I was barely there when I heard screams and shouts. First it was like a dream. The roof of my classroom was blown open. Huge smoke and heavy smell of charred skin and burnt flesh. Not one soul … Not one child was spared. All we saw were cut of limbs, little trunks, cut off heads, with their hair still burning … Ayiba … forty-one of them … all dead. And when the parents came and met me still alive, they took stones, shoes and any other sharp objects they could lay their hands on, and chased me out of town. (93)

Bonuwo's description emphasizes the "charred skin and burnt flesh", thus echoing the earlier description of "bruised skin". The choice of the word "charred" presents burning and incineration of the bodies of the children which is compared to charcoal. The repeated references to the violated body not only emphasizes the horrors of war elicits sympathy for the victims but also emphasizes

the extent to which extreme acts of violence have become normalized. Descriptions of "cut off limbs, little trunks, cut off heads", their "hair still burning" also echo Meme's earlier graphic account of the deaths of her husband and sons and their dismembered bodies: "[she] picked each piece until [she] had each wooden box full" (88). Similar graphic depictions of bodily harm occur when the soldier Kuru, one of the two male characters in the play, enters the scene and threatens to kill the women. Kuru says: "I will skin you all alive, hang you upside down on a pole each, and prick a little hole in your chests until you all die by dropping little drops of blood to the progress and development of the Niger Delta Republic" (103). The image of the "drops of blood" which also forms the title of the play speaks to a context of everyday, ordinary violence but also emphasizes that the restoration of peace requires the shedding of blood. While the blood of men is shed on the battle field, that of women and children is shed in homes and schools. Kuru's words also point to the ways in which men obtain gratification and self-satisfaction by meting out violence to women, again, buttressing Kupers' comment on toxic masculinity. Kuru is clearly excited by the prospect of killing and oppression. Speaking about this, Methuselah notes that,

> Fundamentally, the message by the playwright suggests that women from all walks of life are affected by conflict situations, be they queen as Azue who hitherto had been encoded in her opulent palace but who has been reduced to a beggarly status or the school teacher Bonuwo or even the newlyweds like Mukume who is violently wrested from the side of her husband, psychologically brutalized and raped by none other than the soldiers that are sent to protect them (2014:80).

The play reiterates the fact that war is mostly initiated by the men to exert a masculinist agenda. This view is corroborated by Hooper who argues that military service is the fullest expression of masculinity (1999). It also points to women's disinterest in war and violence. This is what Meme says to defend the women folk when accused by Kuru of being lazy and uninterested in the war. As he rushes into the women's hut and finds them sleeping he says, "Shoo. Is this a women colony? We men are fighting, and you women are sleeping. Wake the stupid fools". But Meme's response articulates a view shared by many women: "we have not sent anyone to kill and die for us. We want peace. We are tired of burying our beloved ones" (103). According to Meme, men only create spaces of suffering and torment: "You see the kind of hell we share? You create it and we live it (108). The implication of Meme's statement is that women are aligned with peace and men with war.

From this quote, we also understand that men have always taken on the role of creator: men create rules, norms and ways of life and women are those who live by these rules, they are only obedient followers. At the end of the conflict, the play also suggests, many women are left with only the destroyed bodies of their loved ones, the post-traumatic depression resulting from violence and the responsibility of taking care of their children alone. This is what Meme describes as the misery and sorrow that men bring to their lives. Meme had expressed this view earlier when she claims that men's egos always determine their actions thereby disregarding women's perspectives: war is always "a cause borne from the ego of man. One that we [women] had no hand or foot in, one in which [women] had no choice but have been ordained the loser. Then it hurts the more" (89). By her nature as a woman, she has been condemned to subservience to man and must suffer the consequences of men's actions. David Tolin and Edna Fao support this when they note that, "although women [are] less likely to directly experience traumatic events, the odds of developing post-traumatic stress symptoms [are] six times higher in women than in men regardless of the level of terror exposure" (2006). Meme's characterization as representative of wisdom and knowledge gives strength and emphasis to her statements. Her opinions should to be taken seriously.

As suggested above, questions of masculinity resurfaces in the depiction of the two male characters in the play, one of which is physically present and one of which is a ghost. Their appearances and actions are akin to what Raewyn Connell calls hegemonic masculinity: they are motivated by the desire to dominate the women around them. The reason for men's insensitivity is mostly because many of them are the planners and executioners of war. And masculinity – what Connell calls hegemonic masculinity requires that men suppress their emotions, this we are able to see through Kuru's emotionless threat to kill. Interestingly in the play, male's attempts to dominate woman and to enforce patriarchal values are ultimately unsuccessful. More important in this play is the way in which the female characters seek to negotiate male dominance, an emphasis that bears a strong resemblance to African feminism. Kuru's initial introduction into the play confirms his violent, oppressive and terrorizing tendencies, thus confirming a new form of masculinity as violent and overwhelming. However, by the end of the play, he has promised to bring peace back to the land: "I swear! With my blood I swear to bring peace here again. I swear. (He returns the knife to Azue who gives it to Memekize) (114). The discussion that follows seeks to understand how such a transformation is brought about.

Nnaemeka's notion of nego-feminism posits that there should be negotiation and cooperation between men and women to bring in balance and equality between the sexes. The inclusion of Kuru in solving the social and political problems depicted in the play can thus be seen as complimeting nego-feminism. Kuru, who has been shot by rioters on his way to the shed, has lost a huge amount of blood. As he gets to the shed and threatens to kill the women, he slumps to the ground instead. The women are the first to tend to his wounds. Meme says, "this is the time to become the real mothers of the clan" (106). The use of the word 'mothers' is not accidental, suggesting the play's alignment with the ideology of motherism as theorized by Catherine Obianuju Acholonu. According to Obianuju Acholonu, motherism entails the nurturing qualities that are traditionally associated with mother. Chidi Maduka describes motherism as being "a model for human love, peace and fruitful interaction with the environment" (2011:17). Even after Kuru has threatened to kill them, the women are still prepared to nurture him and to bring him back to life as mothers would do. When he gains his consciousness, Kuru begins to refer to the women who have now come to symbolize peace as 'mothers'. First, because he has lost his power and his guns and second because he has found his way into the women's hands, and so power has been shifted to them. This suggests that men exert patriarchal dominance because they have equipped themselves with laws (weapons) that are meant to protect them and oppress the women. What is also suggested is that women could take the position of men if laws were made to favour them. The women are able to turn the tables on Kuru who has now taken 'become weak, a status that is often perceived feminine' and women are now.

As noted earlier, Kuru swears to bring peace back to the land and he swears by his blood. This means that, if necessary, he is prepared to sacrifice his life so that peace will reign in the land. This statement suggests that as much as men are a huge part of the problem, they are an equally important part of the solution. Here too, therefore, the play aligns itself with the more collaborative stance of African feminism. One other aspect that is important in this speech is the stage direction that follows which is that he returns the knife. The relevance or importance of stage directions in the understanding and analysis of art works cannot be overemphasized. This gesture of returning the knife to Azue affirms that he gives away his arms and weapons of war and advocates peace in its place. Again, Yerima's deliberate choice of Azue the queen as the recipient of the knife could suggest that he gives power to the rulers of the kingdom, irrespective of their gender. However, Yerima does not stop there; he lets the knife continue its travels until it gets to Meme. Azue gives

the knife to Meme, the wise, experienced in whose hands the knife can safely be placed. Azue recognizes that Meme is older and wiser and, therefore, is better placed to be the keeper of the knife which represents destruction. In this way, the play undoes the privilege given to leaders. The gesture of hierarchy and honour given to Meme due to her age confirms the idea shared by Ogunyemi who notes that age and other hierarchies rather than gender were important in power distribution and identity-shaping in pre-colonial Africa. Furthermore, the play suggests that to maintain peace and harmony in the society especially during the times of war, it is better that women take important decisions since most of them would opt for peace rather than war.

As suggested above, the play places emphasis on agreement, cooperation, and oneness between the sexes, all of which are important features of African feminism. According to Lahoucine Ouzgane and Robert Morrell, "collaboration, negotiation and compromise are key features of African gendered life" (2005:6). According to Nnaemaka, nego-feminism "challenges through negotiations and compromise. It knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" (2003:378). In analysing Ogunyemi's African womanism, Maduka also observes that African womanism "does not emasculate the self-pride of men; rather it lures them into accepting to live harmoniously with them by abandoning their self-perception as superior partners in the collective struggle of the race for a better society" (2011:14-15). The inter-play of such humanizing features are practically represented in the ways the women address Kuru's condition.

After Kuru's declaration of peace, Meme enacts this aptitude for negotiation by kindly going into her shed, getting her late husband's beautiful dress and giving it to Kuru. This shows that they have settled their misunderstandings, reached a compromise and are ready to work together. The removal of Kuru's militant dress and its replacement with the beautiful attire that Meme gives him portrays his changed life and values. He has transformed from a restless militant to a peace-seeking civilian. This resolution suggests that dialogue, negotiation, compromise and unity are the best way of achieving gender equality in Africa. In addition, the fact that Kuru is excited about being beautifully dressed suggests that just as women can be emancipation from patriarchy, men can also be liberated from the damaging social demand associated with masculinity.

As suggested above, questions of dominant masculinity are also explored in the ghost character, Ovievie. Husband to Mukume, he committed suicide after discovering that he was going to be killed. He then appears to Mukume at the shed when other women are sleeping, thus capitalizing on the weakness of an individual woman against a man as presented all through the play. At this point, he confesses his involvement in the cause of the crisis. Ovievie's ghost does not to come apologize for betraying his wife and for involving her in the war; rather he selfishly asks her to join him in death. Even in death, the play suggests, men continue to display their self-centeredness. His statement at Mukume's refusal of his death advances prompts him to ask, "And me? What about me? (102). These questions underline his persistently selfish desires. This is emphasized by his repetition of the personal pronoun "me". But Mukume's reply is contrary to her late husband's. Her reply is positive and selfless and yearns for unity. She says: For once, let your decision not be about you … but about us. Ovievie … us" (102). While Ovievie stresses "me", Mukume stresses "us". This suggests that men are selfish and inconsiderate in their decision-making and actions, and that women are more tolerant and considerate. Meme's attempts to give solidarity and support to Mukume helps Mukume to overcome Ovievie's selfish advances, after which the ghost disappears.

Yerima's play is centered on a women-oriented space where they are able to share their concerns in respect to oppression, war and famine as a result of the ongoing resource crisis in the region. The playwright's calls for a special space reserved for women seems to suggest a similarity with what radical feminists call for – a space/world for women and women alone. In the play, even though a male character is included, his presence initially creates panic, confusion and fear in the midst of the women. However, it is through him - as a representative of patriarchy – that the cause of the crisis within the region is able be alleviated. What can be deduced from this action is that, first, women feel more comfortable among themselves than in the presence of a man. And secondly, since man is the perpetrator of gender problem, they are in a better position to put an end to it.

I conclude this section by restating Margaret Higonnet's, declaration that, "war must be understood as a gendering activity, one that ritually marks the genders of all members of a society, whether or not they are combatants" (1989:4). Irrespective of one's gender, war marks everyone one way of

the other but the depth of this marking is the difference between men (the combatants) and women and children who mostly are victims.

Ecofeminist Exploration of *Little Drops*

Since the play explores the wider effects of environmental pollution and resource control in the Niger Delta region and how this pollution affects the lives of women, it is also vital to explore the feminist theories on environment and how the play might be linked to it. In Africa especially, women have often been associated with nature. As observed in the introductory section of this study, phrases such as 'mother earth', 'mother Africa' 'mother nature' are often used to describe women especially by first generation African male writers. This is because women are perceived to be closer to nature than men.

Ecofeminism combines the two terms, 'eco' and 'feminism' and was first coined and used by French writer Francoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 in her book, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* where she explored the relationship between nature and the female sex. Since then, ecologists have expounded that humans are responsible for environmental degradation, a process that has been described as anthropocentrism. This is an ideology that puts human beings at the heart of everything while they neglect and even exploit nature for their use. Ecofeminism tries to link this exploitation with a gender paradigm. Ecofeminists claim that, like nature, the female gender is oppressed and exploited by men. American author, Heather Eaton claims that ecofeminism entails the "convergence of the ecological and feminist analysis and movements. It represents varieties of theoretical, practical and critical efforts to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature" (2005:11). Karen Warren's definition seem more encompassing. In her view, ecofeminism "is the position that there are important connections between how one treats women, people of colour, and the underclass on one hand and how one treats the nonhuman natural environment on the other hand" (1997: xi). As feminists resist gender repression, they should likewise resist the abuse of nature and anthropocentrism. In a similar vein, Rosemary Radford Reuther posits that "women must see that there there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society who fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unit the womens movement with those of the ecological movement

to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of the [modern industrial] society" (1975:204). Another academic relation between nature and women is reiterated by Warren who contests that, "trees, waters, food production, animals, toxins, and more generally, naturism (i.e. the unjustified domination of non-human nature) are feminist issues because understanding them helps one understand the interconnections among the dominations of women and other subordinated groups of humans" (1997:4). Following Eaton's declaration, fight against gender domination and ecological abuse should be done homogenously.

Ecofeminists claim that the way nature can be linked to the way in which not only women but also the oppression of other marginalized or othered groups such as people of colour, poor people, children, the elderly as well as the less privileged or 'underdeveloped' countries of the Global South. This understanding of the oppression of women can also help in understanding nature and the human environment. This is echoed in the following argument by Rosemary Radford Ruther:

> Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships combines to be one of domination. They must unite the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations and the underlying values of the [modern industrial] society. (1975:204)

In a nutshell, ecofeminists say that if you understand feminism, you will need to understand the interconnectedness between this movement and the fight against environmental exploitation. And because within the paradigm of ecofeminism, they draw a link between women and nature, it is their duty to simultaneously fight gender oppression and to resist ecological abuse.

The above discussion of ecofeminism provides an important entry point into the further analysis of *Little Drops*. Because over 70% of the local dwellers of this region depend solely on nature for their daily source of livelihood, one of the most important reasons for the militancy of the people in the area is the degradation of the ecosystem. Crude oil extraction by government and multinational companies has caused immeasurable damages to every aspect of what constitutes the environment of this region. These include the pollution of water and the contamination of the soil used for agricultural purposes. Animal life has also been affected and, since it is a riverine area, consumable and commercial water animals such as fish, crayfish and prawns have been killed at high rate. These shortages have clearly affected the quality of life of those who live in the region and have, therefore, heightened the rate of poverty. Speaking about the effect of this damage,

Ebegbulem Ekpe Dickson and Adeyemo Theophilus note that, "the region remains the poorest, due largely to the ecologically unfriendly exploitation of oil and state policies that expropriate the indigenous people of the Niger Delta of their rights to these natural resources" (2013:279). This condition explains Meme's predicament in the play. Speaking with other women who come to her home, she specifically laments this condition when she says, "My family and I were fishermen before the war took off. I was the best fish seller in this part of the creek, but now the water is polluted. Oil kills the fishes before we get there" (61). While she complains of the war, she also speaks of the effect of oil spillage on the rivers and how fishes die before they can be caught. This means that Meme's business has plummeted, and poverty has set in. The fact that she can no longer trade in a business in which she was very successful is not only due to the consequence of war, but also derives from the selfish activities of the oil extractors. Like many other women who do the same business, her means of livelihood has been jeopardized.

Because the water in the Niger Delta region has been contaminated, it means that women have to engage in more difficult domestic work. To get drinkable water for themselves and their families, they have to cover longer distances than they used to. In a patriarchal community like Gbarambatu, women have to double their labour in order to carry out their social and domestic activities since they are the ones saddled with domestic responsibilities. For instance, Warren notes that "in the southern hemisphere, women and children perform most of the water-collection work. Because of natural resources depletion, women also must walk further for water" (1997:7). And as a result of lack of drinkable water, many children lose their lives as they battle with different avoidable diseases. In a report presented by UNICEF, an estimation of fifteen million children die every year before the age of five: half of them could be saved if they had access to safe drinking water. Activities carried out by oil extraction in countries like Nigeria and regions like the Niger Delta continues to increase the percentage of children who die as a result of shortage of drinkable water. From the analysis above, *Little Drops* can be read as not only feminist in its ethos, it is also embodies the ideology of ecofeminism. The play hints at environmental degradation through the figure of Meme and shows various examples of women's suffering at the hands of men, thus suggesting that an ecofeminist reading of this aspect of the texts concerns is appropriate.

Conclusion

Little Drops depicts the experiences of women in extreme circumstances. In this case, the circumstance of conflict and war are used to highlight the lives of women. This means that, while *Aetu* and *Abobaku* depict women's lives within circumstances of the daily live, *Little Drops* takes women's experience to uncommon yet significant circumstances of human lives, albeit, still oppressive to women. In another view, in relation to *Aetu* and *Abobaku*, *Little Drops* presents a totally different perspective on Yerima's understanding of gender imbalances within the Nigerian society. In Chapter two, *Aetu* is read to offer varying perceptions, definitions and understandings of women's experience. However, this play presents a unified female perspective. Where other plays examined in this study present polyphonic standpoints, *Little Drops* tends towards a more singular vision: all the women characters in the play agree that women have fallen victim to the powerplay between the political institution of the government and the patriarchal society where they live. The previous play makes it clear that culture, custom and tradition have been agents of oppression to women, but in this play, there is a shift in focus from culture to re-present one of the most pressing concerns (the NNDC oil crisis) of Nigeria through a gendered eye. Yerima presents this Niger Delta crisis from the perspective of women, showing not only the trauma and suffering it causes but the ways in which women remain outside of the centres of power. Not consulted or informed about political decisions, they become nothing but victims of the actions of others. The suffering of women in particular is captured in the title of the play. In the course of the play, Memekize, Mukume, Azue and Bonuwo all shed "little drops of blood, of ogogoro, of rain and of life" (65). Memekize loses her entire family, Mukume is raped repeatedly, Azue loses her innocent son as well as her husband and Bonuwo loses her beloved pupils.

Another important aspect of the play's concerns is the depiction of hegemonic masculinity. This is understood as the demonstration of physical strength, the suppression of emotions and absolute egoistic demeanors from the rioters in the play which suggests that the society is patriarchal. The desire to fight, dominate and oppress the 'inferior' persons are depicted as motivations for men's actions. In this play however, after losing power to the women, men become cooperative and ready to reach an agreement with the women. This means that, the form of patriarchy that exists is transient, dynamic and alterable but only after losing power to the oppressed. In the other aspect

of gender, femininity as presented in the play entails women's absolute submission to men's course, supporting them, motivating them and seeing every man's action as steps taken to better the world for the women. When women fail to do these, men's ego and superiority are threatened and then they intimidate these women as seen in Kuru's brutal actions toward the women. The play also suggests that femininity is not only limited to unquestionable obedience by the women, it also entails that they contribute their quota in finding lasting peace to violence that ensues the society. And when reasonably planned and presented, men can lower their ego and follow the peaceful plans and suggestions that have been presented by women. So, the kind of gender relation that exists in relation to this play entails the critique of men's superiority and women's inferiority but also opens up a space for negotiation, compromise and unity.

The play explores the importance of intra-gender unity as posited within the camp of the women and inter-gender unity as later presented through relation between Kuru and the women at the camp. It presents the unparalleled relevance of unity in achieving what Omolara Leslie-Ogundipe calls STIWA-nism – Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. The women are able to overcome their individual pains through supports from fellow women in the camp and as women, their supportive qualities in fighting together to 'overcome' Kuru is significant. The unity goes further as the story concludes, all the women join forces together in collaboration with Kuru in order to achieve one unified mission of restoring peace, order, and equality to the kingdom. This inter-gender unity affirms Chioma Filomina Steady's assertion that

> African pattern of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive perspective. For women, the male is not 'the other' but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes human whole. Neither set is totally complete in itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own. (1987:8)

Most importantly, the play is able to project the significance of Afro-centric gender theory - Nego-feminism, which alludes to the importance of negotiation between both genders toward egalitarian Africa. The implication of this identity of unity and communality re-establishes the notion of oneness and alliance that exists within African world. Called *Ubuntu* in the South African context or the phrasal composition, *agbajowo lafin so'ya* of the Yoruba people or *Ushirika* in the Swahili language, all emphasizing the relevance and importance of togetherness in the African cosmos as against the often more individualistic and egomaniacal western culture.

CHAPTER FOUR: *ABOBAKU*: MASCULINITY, ANTI-MASCULINITY AND FEMININITY REDEFINED?

In this chapter, I continue my exploration of the negotiation of gender and gender oppression in selected plays by Yerima, giving particular attention to the relationship between Yerima's work and African feminist/womanist and western feminist theories. The central question I ask is: does Yerima take a similar path to many African and western theorists of gender or is he pushing in a new direction? The answer to this question will be determined by careful reading and analysis of Yerima's play *Abobaku* (2015). Of specific concern in this chapter are the various ways in which Yerima's plays engage with religion and tradition as modes of oppression, repression and abuse within Yoruba society and the form(s) of resistance if there is any, that the victims adopt.

In the previous chapter, the focus was exclusively on how men, through traditional and social practices, become agents of oppression and how women, become the helpless victims. In *Aetu*, the female protagonist, Aetu, depicted as a victim of men's oppression, is subjected to numerous forms of abuse by different men. In *Abobaku*, a present-day play rooted in the surviving pre-colonial tradition of the Yoruba people, the figure of the oppressed is extended to include men. In this case also, as in the previous example, the oppressor remains male, a role that the play shows is sanctioned by traditional and religious systems. Even though the story is woven around the female hero (Faramola), the predominant focus is on the oppression of the male protagonist, Ajibade. Ajibade's role as an abobaku is depicted as masculine, dignifying and one that accords the abobaku status of a legend after his death but, as the play goes on, he is contrarily presented as a 'man who is less than a man'. Although, this play marks an obvious shift of victimhood from the female to the male, the perpetrator remains the male gender, it nevertheless continues Yerima's exploration of women's oppression and entrapment at the hands of husbands, or fathers or leaders. That said, what is suggested in this play is an understanding of gender oppression which includes those men who have been defined as not 'men enough', a status that Raewyn Connell refers to as surbodinate masculinity.

This inclusive, wholistic and multi-directional paradigm of exploring gender in the play can be read along with the shift in Western feminist discourse which now broaden feminist discourse to encompass the positions of men. A similar concern with the broader category of gender is

suggested in African womanist perspectives such as those associated with Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and others. In these concept, African gender theorists factor African men in their concept of feminism considering the fact that African men have also been victims of a different kind of oppression – colonialism. This perspective also speaks to Raewyn Connell's notion of subordinate masculinity – a form of masculinity which limits a man from obtaining hegemonic masculinity because of characteristics such as race, class and sexuality. Of further interest in this regard is Nego-feminist theorist of Obioma Nnaemeka which claims that negotiation between the sexes is the only way forward if gender equality must be achieved. Nnaemeka sees African men as partners in the quest to achieve absolute equality since they have been oppressed as a result of colonialism and ongoing racial discrimination. Ogunyemi's views about the necessity of bringing men into the discussion are also relevant here: "all the time, I am conscious of the fact that African men are also oppressed. If you put them in a global context, African men are also oppressed" (Ogunyemi in Arndt 2000:721). Yerima demonstrates his sympathy with these views by balancing his earlier concern with women's oppression with a powerful dramatization of how men also fall victim to patriarchal regimes. Unlike Ogunyemi and Nnaemeka who place the blame on western superiority, Yerima seems to point to the role of tradition in defining gender roles as problematic.

Working to some extent against the womanist paradigm, this study explores how Africans in diverse ways have supported certain practices which cause various kinds of harm. For instance, the traditional practices explored in *Aetu* such as wife inheritance and levirate marriage are pre-colonial in origin, they persisted during colonialism and continue to threaten the peace and equality of Yoruba society decades after the formal end of colonialism. Although the debates persist as to whether pre-colonial Yoruba culture was oppressive or not, the status of women during this period in comparison to the present modern world is clearly different. For instance, the practice of wife inheritance has decreased drastically, the apportioning of domestic duties only to women has also dwindled and, most importantly, women are now more educated and enlightened, and to a large extent, can determine the course of their lives without being dictated to by the cultural status quo. Although Nigerian society still judges and sometimes stigmatizes those women who decide to move along non-traditional or unconventional routes, female independence is much more prominent. However, the evidence provided by Yerima's play *Abobaku* suggests that cultural, traditional and religious practices continue to contribute to various forms of gender oppression in Nigeria, that African people have enslaved themselves in other ways but these are not given as

much attention as colonialism. One of the characters in the play, laments this when he says: "we, with our own hands have enslaved ourselves to the jaws of death" (69).

This chapter also pays a close attention to religious beliefs and practices that position a group of people within a particular cultural space as superior to others. It is important to note that this chapter gives specific attention to religious beliefs and practices rather than the broader cultural practices explored in the previous chapter. In particular, it gives attention to the religious practice of abobaku as depicted Yerima's play of the same title. *Abobaku* is a ritual practice where a man is killed and buried along with the king in order to escort him to the abode of the ancestors. In *Abobaku*, Yerima reflects on the extent to which an important religious practice of the Yoruba people is oppressive to men. I suggest that this practice is religious in nature because it forms part of the ordinances and doctrines of ancestral Yoruba spiritual practices. It thus matches Edward Burnett Tylor's classic definition of religion as "the belief in supernatural beings" (1871:424); it also agrees with sociologist Emile Durkheim's understanding of religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden" (1973:129). The practice of *abobaku* is religious rather than cultural in nature because of its popular connection to the spiritual and divine, namely the gods, the ancestors and life after death. This practice is one of the many beliefs birthed by the Yoruba cosmos. However, to discuss and analyse how this religious practice is negotiated within the play, it is important to establish the context from which the playwright operates. What is the social structure of the Yoruba people and why is the practice of *abobaku* relevant? Since this practice has a lot to do with class within the society, it is imperative that class structure within this group of people be briefly examined. As suggested above, *Abobaku* is a play that explores that part of the Yoruba religion which forces a man to take up a subservient role under a person or a group of persons who, in the eyes of contemporary human rights law, are his equals. In Yoruba mythology however, as depicted by Yerima, those who are called to this role are seen as lower status men than the people of the upper echelon. The form of structural hierarchy that existed in pre-colonial Yoruba culture is that which gave power to a certain people led by the superior *kabiyesi* (king) whose power is checked only by a certain group of seven men called the *oyomesi*. The lowest group are those called *eru* (slaves).

According to American anthropologist Melville Herskovits, "Yoruba [people] have a complex and highly stratified social structure" (1938:137). This structural composition is further explained by William Bascom when he makes the following point:

> [In Yoruba society rank] depends upon a series of factors other than an individual's personality or capabilities, including wealth, sex, his station as free or slave, his relative age or seniority, the rank of the clan into which he is born, the political or religious office which he achieves or inherits, and the social position of his relatives, friends and associates. All of these affect the pressure which he can bring to bear on others, through his ties with the king and the chiefs, in the event that he becomes involved in a dispute with them. (2009 :491)

Bascom's detailed amplification points to a range of political, social, religious, economic and familial classes. The first category that will be discussed is that which is attained by birth or inheritance. According to Bascom, these include, sex, being born free or slave, seniority by age, the clan or family into which one is born and the religion which one practices. These identities are hereditary and, therefore, one's belongingness or not to these will determine the class in which one is positioned. For instance, a child born into the clan or a family of royalty is automatically classified as superior to the one born into a title-less family. In addition, during periods of warfare, such as occurred in the Yoruba kingdoms between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the victors of war would acquire those who were defeated as slaves. To this day, their offspring continue to be classified as lesser humans compared to the original victors and owners of the lands (Akinjogbin Adeagbo, 1998, Ezekiel Oladele Adeoti and James Olusegun Adeyeri, 2013). Another example of identity by birth is sex: due to the patriarchal setting of the Yoruba system, as in many other cultures, the male is considered superior to the female. Age difference is also a factor as it is a way of measuring status. People who are born around the same time mostly play or work in that age group. Age determines seniority. All of the forms of identity above are important because they have an influence on individual's success.

Political status, arguably the most influential factor, is again inexorably connected to one's birth. Even though the king is selected by the *Oyomesi*, the candidate has to be a freeborn, one born into a royal family, and a male. Once chosen, the *kabiyesi,* who is the Oba (king) assumes office as the most important person in the community. He is often referred to as the *Igbakeji orisa* (one next only to the deities). Writing about pre-colonial Yoruba society, a system which to some extent is still evident in present-day Yoruba communities, Tunde Onadeko observes that, "the Oba (King),

who was the supreme head of the government, was an absolute ruler ... He was Kabiyesi (who should we ask/challenge?): his authority was not to be challenged by any of his subjects. He was considered the representative of Olodumare (God Almighty)" (2008:16). The *Oba/Kabiyesi* however did not operate autocratically. He had his cabinet and the Oyomesi who contributed to the enforcement and jurisdiction of law.

The cabinet consisted of various chiefs, the majority of whom were male. The number of the chiefs depended either on which roles were available to be performed within a community or on the number of people of merit in the society. Again, one must be born into the clan where members can become chiefs before one can be made a chief. Aside from the chiefs, the ruling structure also consisted of the appointed representatives of the king in various small villages – delegated authorities. They received complaints from the villagers and passed them on to the king, they settled minor misunderstandings and sometimes attended meetings with the king and chiefs. Coupled with being born into a higher status in this system, men and women could achieve or acquire a higher position for themselves through hard work or favour. In addition, individuals could also acquire titles through the king's prerogative: these include religious titles such as the Ifa priest, the Esu priest, the Yeye Osun priest, the Orunmila priest and so on. There are also titles relating to royal duties such as Ilari, Abobaku and Akoda (FT Lateju and Olusegun Oladosu. 2012).

Those who do not possess identity or status by hereditary may attain higher social status through wealth acquired by success in business, these titles are non-hereditary. As in many other societies, wealth commands respect in the Yoruba society. The ordinary citizen who is not born into any of the classes above or who has not attained significant wealth is simply an ordinary villager. However, this ordinary villager is given greater value than someone who is the descendant of a 'slave'. In Yoruba society, those who are born of 'slave' ancestors take the lowliest positions in the social hierarchy. By and large, one's birth served, and continues to serve as the bedrock of one's social destiny. It is this social structure, coupled with other Yoruba micro and macro-traditional practices, that Yerima explores in his play.

The social structure is reflected in the play in the following way: the male characters are classed into two groups – first, the superior men represented by the Oba and other chiefs such as Balogun and Osi and second the lower men represented by Ajibade and Ilari. For being a female, a woman's class or position is dependent on the status of their men (husbands). For instance, the queen, as the

wife of the king, is superior to all other women in the village. Next to her is the Iyalode who is a chief in the king's cabinet. She is the next in the female political hierarchy and is the one who coordinates all female activities in the community such as the use of the village market and the cleaning of the market area and other parts of the village. But, until recently, irrespective of the status that the queen or any woman may acquire within the community, as a woman she remained inferior to men of any status and therefore had to keep and maintain her status as such.

The Story Behind the Story

The play is based on a recent incident which took place at Ile-Ife, the most sacred city in the Yoruba mythos, a city which has been described as the first place of habitation created by God (Adeoye, 1980). According to Suzanne Preston Blier, it is the "ancestral home to the Yoruba and mythic birthplace of gods and humans" (2012:70). This makes *Abobaku* an historical play, even though it dramatizes a recent event. On the 28th of July 2015, Ooni of Ife, the king of Ile Ife, Oba Sijuade Okunade passed away at the age of eighty-five after reigning over his people for a period of thirty-five years. In many quarters, the title of Ooni of Ife is regarded as the highest position among Yoruba kings. He is seen as the senior *Oba Yoruba* (Yoruba King). William Bascom attests to this when he argues that, "the [Oni], ranks as the highest of the Yoruba kings by virtue of seniority" (2009:491). As one of the most esteemed traditional rulers in the country, Oba Sijuade's passing became a huge story in the tabloids and political leaders competed over who would send the first and best condolence messages to his family.

At the death of the Ooni, the abobaku was rumoured to have absconded. Various sensational pictures (their authenticity or otherwise is yet to be established) of the aforementioned *abobaku* flooded the media and internet and the subject soon became the 'talk-of-the-town'. However, there were conflicting versions of the story: some stories denied the existence of an *abobaku* in the late king's palace and some denied that he had disappeared at all. Although many of the stories that flew around the internet were based on rumour, this topic generated a lot of arguments concerning the veracity or falsity of the story. The most interesting, however is that, it was through this media coverage that millions of Nigerians and non-Nigerians came to know of the practice of *abobaku* for the first time. As suggested earlier, it was this event which provided the inspiration for Yerima's

play. Of all the commentaries this story generated, it was only Yerima who took up the gender implications of the story by refashioning the incident into a story of gendered oppression.

It was in same year of the death of the Ooni of Ife that Yerima embarked on the writing of his play *Abobaku.* The play is thus a dramatized version of the original demise of Oba Sijuade Okunnade and the rumoured disappearance of his *abobaku*. Yerima alludes to this in his author's note that: "this play is written in honour of a grand old man who recently passed on … even in death, he remains an inspiration for this new play. This is why I dedicate this play to him" (5-6). By describing the king as "a grand old man", Yerima alludes to his personal relationship with the Ooni before and after he became king. The playwright's inclusion of his relationship with the late Kabiyesi brings the story closer to him. Similarly, because he writes from a close and familiar position, he automatically draws his audience nearer. Yerima adapts the original story by including a sequence in which the wife of *abobaku* offers herself as a substitute when her husband refuses to perform his duty, an incident which did not transpire in the aftermath of the original Ooni's death.

As stated in the opening direction, the play opens in the "Ipedi room in the presence of the three gods, Ogun, Osun and Esu" (8). The presence of these three gods, god of iron, fertility and trickery respectively, is meant to establish the fact that the oath that Ajibade takes is a serious one. Not only are these present, the oath is taken right in their shrine. This is the sacred room in which Ajibade is being instated as *abobaku* and where he takes his oath of office. The implication of this is that Ajibade cannot opt out. Taking the oaths, Ajibade swears to remain faithful to his lord (the king) in life and in death and to commit a ritual suicide after the king's death to escort the Oba to the land of the ancestors. He assures the king, chiefs and priest of his willingness to be an *abobaku* and that he has not been forced into it. Going further to prove his commitment, he swears with a sword (iron) which represents one of the Yoruba pantheons – Ogun, the god of iron. He says, "This is the sword of Ogun. The next time we meet will be at the shrine of Ogun where you shall remove my head in order to allow me the honour to meet my king … my partner … my god". He continues with the oath by telling Oba Karunmi (the king whom he is to escort after his death) that, "I shall serve you in life and in death. I give you my soul willingly, till death and after" (9). Ajibade is cheerful amidst the celebrations in honour of his dignification as the new *abobaku.* He assumes this office with communal and royal honours. To repay Ajibade for his kind gesture, at his

conferment ceremony, the king promises him a comfortable life. And Ajibade promises to perform his duty to the best of his abilities despite the gravity of the job.

The play possesses some of the features or characteristics of tragedy discussed in chapter two. The play is set in two different locales, namely Adeoti village and Gbalefefe village; the latter is the place to which Ajibade runs for safety after the king had died. Ajibade is able to find safety and refuge at Gbalefefe until he is visited by two women from his village. The play is acted out in thirteen different scenes and the events are enacted in chronological order. That is, unlike the convoluted plot and time structure employed in *Aetu*, the events in this play are linear as one event leads chronologically to the other without analepsis or flashback. As in *Aetu*, the playwright employs simple, accessible English and does not include many proverbs and parables in the manner mostly employed by some Nigerian playwrights such as Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe and Ola Rotimi. The play includes a minimum of fifteen speaking characters. In my analysis of gender-related concerns, only four of these characters – namely, Ajibade, Faramola, Ilari (an eponym, i.e., Ilari is his name and the title of his duty), and Mama – will be highlighted. First, I shall consider the play's negotiation of gender in relation to the male characters, Ajibade and Ilari after which I will turn my attention to the mediation of gender in relation to the female characters, Faramola and Mama.

'Meat for the Alter': Examining Ajibade's Destiny

Yerima's play presents the job and duty of *abobaku* as degrading, demanding and destructive. For this reason, I will begin the analysis by exploring Ajibade, the abobaku, as a figure of oppression. Most of the responses to Ajibade's sacrificial responsibility are presented through the voice of his wife, Faramola, as she, like most women, must bear the brunt of her spouse's death. It is her state of mind and perspective that is privileged in the play. At the beginning of play when the king is seriously ill, whispers in the palace confirm the impending doom, namely that severe illness will result in the king's inexorable death. In all this, Faramola is consumed with fear and anxiety about her husband's status as an *abobaku*. She discloses her mother how her heart bleeds because of the illness of the king, knowing that his death will immediately usher in that of her husband's. She says, "You do not want to begin to imagine what rises in my heart, Mama. I am filled with fear for

my husband's life" (17). The remark suggests that Faramola's heart is not only in turmoil as a result of the inevitable impending calamity coming upon her husband but also that she is worried about what her life will be like after her husband's death; she is concerned with the reverberations and echoes of her husband's self-immolation. Her husband, by contrast, still lives in oblivion and a state of pleasure and thoughtlessness. At this moment when Faramola is troubled by the death that awaits him, Ajibade is having customary sexual intercourse with the queen – the wife of the extremely ill king. The custom demands that the queen whose husband is dying must give sexual gratification to the abobaku as a way of pleasing him and ameliorating the pain of the death that awaits him and also allowing him to enjoy what the kabiyesi enjoys. While this is a customary practice in these circumstances, it also reinforces the point that he is not unduly bothered by the death that awaits him because of the momentary pleasure he is having with the queen.

The play uses metaphors and similes of sacrifice to describe Ajibade's predicament. For Faramola, Ajibade is like 'meat meant for the altar'; she remarks that "Ajibade lives a step at a time … like the trapeze dancer between the pointed edges of the Idanre hill. But only this time, these dark times, the noose is not on his neck, it spreads at the shaky steadfastness of his doomed feet" (12). The use of the simile that compares Ajibade's life to a trapeze dancer between the pointed edges of the Idanre hill suggests that his life is unstable and precarious. The image of the trapeze dancer also helps to understand why the noose is on his doomed feet rather than on his neck. As we discover later in the play, despite his initial bravery at his oath-taking, Ajibade is terrified at the prospect of his fate. Yerima's use of the oxymoron "shaky steadfastness" could be interpreted in light of the fact that, at this point in the play's action, Faramola has decided that she will give her life in place of her husband's. That is, Ajibade's life is shaky since his wife still hopes that he will be saved from the impending doom but Faramola's decision to give her life in place of her husband is sure and steadfast. So, the paradox has to do with the lives of this subordinate and oppressed couple. She also compares him to a village lamp: "There he lies, the village lamp. How ready he is I cannot tell" (30). In this image, the play suggests that Ajibade's duty is one of service to his community, a duty that will bring light to the village. As the *abobaku*, Ajibade's sacrificial service to the king provides metaphorical light to the community as it is essential to the peace and fruitfulness of the community after the passing of the king. However, his objectification as a lamp is also suggestive of a more disturbing aspect, which is that he is merely an instrument in the service of the king and the community, doomed to perform a ritual suicide. Faramola's reference

to the tradition as an "accursed one" is suggestive of the playwright's direction and emphasis in relation to the theme of the play. Thus, we can see the various ways in which the degrading and inhuman aspects of the practice of *abobaku* are brought to fore.

As I hope to suggest, the play's negative treatment of religious practices demonstrate the ways in which not only women, but socially subordinate men also face oppression from stronger and more powerful men who make and operate the wheel of tradition. Ajbade's oath at the beginning of the play establishes this. His oath to the sword that "the next time we meet will be at the shrine of Ogun where you shall remove my head …" (9) are lacking in emotion and demonstrate a lack of respect for his service which can be understood in light of the fact that he has sold his soul to the king. In addition, although Ajibade is shown to be treated with fairness and even generosity – he enjoys several royal privileges for his service as an *abobaku* – the play also indicates that he is just 'made fat for the evil day'. This is synchronous with the Yoruba saying, *ife pipaje lanisediye* (the love we have for our chicken is only for the purpose of the meat we will get from it). What is suggestive of this ritual practice is that the 'powerful' – what Yerima, in his author's note calls "those who own men" (6) in the community – oppress their subjects irrespective of their gender. In his attention to forms of oppression experienced by subordinate men, Yerima thus addresses a gap in the literature on gender oppression which has tended to focus on ways in which men oppress women and how men and women have been oppressed by colonialism.

Ajibade is made to undergo degrading ritual practices despite his status as a man. As suggested above, his painful journey as an *abobaku* is deceitfully sweetened by all the cares and gratification that the palace can offer. This is noted by Abore (the chief priest) at the beginning of the play when he instructs Olori Ilari to: "treat him with the care of royalty. Let him eat and drink like the king. Let him know no want. Let him enjoy life to the fullest" (10). Yet, all this care is synonymous with the 'love one has for his chicken'. By the end of the play, despite his initial refusal and disappearance, Ajibade does eventually perform his duty not because he wants to be faithful to his oaths but because he tries to save his wife who has offered up her life in his place. Whether or not Ajibade's sacrifice would still be acceptable to the gods is a matter that the play does not reflect on. More importantly, as I go on to argue, Ajibade is not to be the only male character in this play who suffers oppression in the hands of "those who own men". The character, Ilari's, Faramola's father, is also one who experiences abuse at the hands of other men.

According to Oyeronke Olajube, the Ilaris, especially those of the pre-colonial and colonial eras, were

> [R]ecognized by a special hair-do that divided their hair into three parts (aso-meta). They were messengers to the Alafin and usually went in front of him at any occasion of sacrifice. On ritual occasions, the Ilari's apparel was a white wrapper tied on the chest, but on regular days they were usually clad in loose trousers and a gown, known as atu and gbariye. At any point in time, the Ilari was armed with a cutlass, just in case there was a need to defend the ruler. The Alafin delegated some authorities to the Ilaris because they were highly trusted. For example, they collected tributes (Isakole) from districts, each covering a specified area of jurisdiction. This privileged position granted to the Ilaris was an avenue to exercise power and accumulate wealth (2007:280).

From the lengthy quote, it is clear that although the *abobaku* title is granted higher authority, the position of Ilari is also one which commands respect and has dignity. His services include those of guarding and errand running for the king in contrast to *abobaku* who is a shadow to the king as well as a friend.

Yerima's reading of tradition as oppressive is indicated in his portrayal of Ilari. He presents a situation in which, in his quest to perform his duty diligently, Ilari choses to deny his daughter Faramola, the fatherly affection she needs to cope with the inpening demise of her husband. This becomes evident in a scene in which his daughter Faramola seeks his knowledge about the state of health of the king whose life is attached to her husband's and indirectly to hers. As it becomes clear that the king is going to die, the queen sends Ilari to Ajibade in order to tell him to appear before her in order to receive his final reward of sexual intercourse with the queen. But when Ilari goes to call Ajibade, Faramola engages him in a conversation, this conversation provides insight into Ilari's character and attitudes. Faramola tries to draw out some sympathy and assistance from her father as to how her husband's life can be saved but all she gets is a cruel, emotionless and callous reaction:

> Faramola: Go then, this woman is in search of the softness of the cotton wool to lay her heart, and the understanding of a father.
>
> Ilari: Father? (Chuckles. walks to the door). I am sorry woman, I have no daughter. Mine died long time ago …
>
> Faramola: Even when she finds herself caught in the spider's web? Father, find a place for her in your now condensed heart of stone.

> Ilari: Heart? Um. Mine bled out with my juice of life the day I took an oath as Ilari, to serve no one but my king.
>
> Faramola: Ha, Baba! What foul words. What chilled dose of wickedness. How can I beg you now? Even if I had once thought about it, your present harsh words have indeed torched my heart with the flame of sadness. Go, old man.
>
> Ilari: … (Chuckles). Old man … a better title indeed. You once again remind me of who and what I am … a trusted messenger of the palace. Yet, as Ilari, I have no heart. I have no blood or an iota of emotion in my heart. It all died the day I was castrated for the safety of the king and I swore to make Oba Karunwi my king … my god. (14-15)

The image of soft "cotton wool" suggests the qualities of Ilari's expected and required behaviour as a father toward his daughter; the phrase "condensed heart of stone" reveals the reality of coldness and distance Faramola gets from her father. In the gloomy and saddened state that Faramola finds herself, she desires a soft and accommodating heart but, instead, what she gets is a cold and hard one. As the quotation suggests, as a result of his position, Ilari's heart has become as hard and lifeless as a stone. According to Ilari, the loss of emotional attachment to his family occurred on the day he was castrated as a prerequisite for service. The use of diction such as "juice", and "blood" represents the life qualities he has to forgo as a result of his castration. It also means that his ability to reproduce (conceive) has been taken away. His "blood" which stands for life, bled out the day he took "an oath to serve no one but" the king. Because everything that constitutes life in him has been taken away, his family has come to mean nothing to him. In fact, one could say Ilari now works like a programmed automaton who only serves his master and sees every other person as his enemy. As Famarola's reply suggests, Ilari's callousness has inflamed his family with sadness.

Further evidence of Ilari's dissociation from his family is the fact that he calls his daughter "woman", a gesture which is uncommon in the Yoruba culture. For, irrespective of a woman's age, her parent will continue to call her by her name. The only deviation is when she is called through the name of her child if she has one. The fact that Ilari calls his daughter "woman" suggests that his fatherly connection has been obliterated as a result of his commitment to the king.

There is no clear information in the play as to why he has to be castrated except that he says it is "for the safety of the king" (15). From the perspective of this play, it is clear that this is just an act of cruelty in order to ensure the sexual safety of the king and his family. The fact that he has to be

denied sexual pleasure is depicted as suppressive, abusive and exploitive. The level of degradation that he is subjected to is not only unacceptable; it suggests that the palace devised this act as a way of preventing him from being a sexual threat to any female member of the palace. As the play makes clear, this is done without considering the effect of this act of callousness on his spouse and family. Ilari is rendered emotionally and physically handicapped because of this practice and his relationship with his wife and daughter suffers as a result. If masculinity is defined in some cases in terms of "procreation" (Gilmore 1990:223), Ilari's willingness to give up his manhood can also be seen as unmanning or effeminizing the man in him. Furthermore, that he undertakes this decision in order to reinforce, magnify and exalt the already exalted status of the king provides additional evidence of this tyrannical system. From this analysis therefore, it is obvious that Yerima condemns this practice as it severs family bonds and brings the man to a state of heartlessness and loss. This important father-daughter sequence thus establishes the practice as deeply inhumane.

If the play presents the requirements of tradition as idiosyncratic and cruel, it also confirms that they serve only the interests of the king or the superior members of the society. Just as laws are made in favour of the law maker(s), so traditional practices often favour the comfort of the kings rather than those they rule over. In the stories of these male characters, the play shows the oppressive impact of traditional practices on the lives of ordinary men and reveals the boomerang effects which are transferred to their families and even to those who are not yet born.

The ancient Greek proverb, 'those whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad' provides an apt description of this play as both victims, Ajibade and Ilari, are tortured while they live before dying their respective miserable deaths. Both Ajibade and Ilari are initially 'made mad' in the sense that they have to endure trauma before they eventually give their lives for the king who is seen as a 'god' in the Yoruba world. Upon hearing of the king's death, Ajibade is disturbed and begs for help to avoid his impending death. In an attempt to circumvent fate, he then embarks on a difficult journey to the nearby village of Gbalefefe. For Ilari, his humiliating status as castrated servant and the consequent destruction of family bonds is just as maddening as Ajibade's predicament. As the play suggests, as a result of their subordinate or subaltern status, Ajibade and Ilari must accept a life of subservience to the king and the palace. Even though they are presented as reluctant participants in the fulfillment of their duties, their religious beliefs ultimately

supersede their personal desires. While Ajibade absconds from his community of origin to avoid being sacrificed, Ilari breaches the trust of the gods by assisting Ajibade's disappearance and so also experiences personal torture. The desire to fulfill the demands of their oaths raises the question of masculinity which I will now go on to explore.

Navigating Masculinities in *Abobaku*

Masculinity can be defined as a set of socially-constructed and biologically-fashioned features, behaviours and roles commonly associated with the male sex. In other words, masculinity is profoundly informed by cultural and sociological norms. As John Beynon notes, "Men are not born with masculinity as part of their genetic make-up; rather it is something into which they are acculturated and which is composed of social codes of behaviour which they learn to reproduce in culturally appropriate ways" (2002:1). Speaking on the same subject, Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis and Simon Watson observe that "masculinity can never float free of culture: On the contrary, it is the child of culture, shaped and expressed differently at different times in different circumstances in different places by individuals and groups" (1995:7). Jan Stets and Peter Burke claim that, "Femininity and masculinity are not innate but are based upon social and cultural conditions" (2000:998). The point is also emphasized by Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell whose various publications on gender studies, especially her famous interventions on the question of 'hegemonic masculinity' has become an important resource for gender theorists. According to Connell, "masculinity, understood as a configuration of practices in everyday life, is substantially a social construction. Masculinity refers to male bodies (sometimes symbolically and indirectly) but is not determined by male biology" (2001:140). From the above understandings, therefore, we can conclude that what determines one's gender is society and that this society creates or forms what is masculine and what is not. Now, I shall I explore the implications of these perspectives in relation to the portrayal of masculinity in *Abobabku*.

The normative construction of gender in traditional Yoruba society demands that men be heroic, stoical and somewhat controlling. Moreover, the social order is an unequal one: the hierarchical social structure of the Yoruba people discussed earlier in this chapter means that men are not regarded as all the same or equal. As there are men who are superior to other men, there are also

men with lower status. These latter categories of men are appreciated for their ability and willingness to sacrifice themselves for the superior men or the community at large. This inequality is pointed out by Robert Morrell and Lahoucine Ouzgane who, when discussing masculinity, state that "not all men have the same amount or type of power, the same opportunity, and, consequently, the same life trajectories" (2005:4). The fictional characters Ajibade and Ilari in Yerima's *Abobaku* can clearly be understood as the 'lesser men' in this scenario. The plot of the play is unconventionally woven around four characters who are of lesser status – two of them male and two female. Ajibade – the ordained agent of sacrifice; Ilari – the castrated servant in the king's palace; Faramola – the substituted agent of sacrifice; and Mama – the sufferer due to the tragedies that befall the previous three characters.

As suggested above, Ajibade and Ilari are male characters who are thrown into the demanding turmoil of masculinity as demanded by their culture. The feigned praises and deceptive adulation heaped upon Ajibade after his installation as the king's abobaku are clear indications of the kinds of cultural pressure men face. As a man, Ajibade is initially culturally attuned to seeing himself as 'man enough' to be the *abobaku*. The position of *abobaku* which he assumes at the beginning of the play is a signifier of his bravery, stoicism and manliness. He is praised to high heavens in phrases such as "Baba Kekere", (the little king) – one who is next to the king in rank – and "shadow of the king" – the king's right-hand man and closest associate. This honour and these praise names are meant to instill confidence in him. Conversely however, when men fail to uphold these manly titles and demands, they are not only mocked by their fellow men, but women also denounce them as weaklings and question their status as men. Ajibade's refusal to carry out his role thus has important implications for the play's exploration of masculinity. The conventional female response to male cowardice is represented by the characters of Mama and Iyalode who ridicule Ajibade and insult his unmanly behaviour. Upon Ajibade's disappearance and Faramola's offer to take his place, Iyalode and Mama are seen ridiculing and insulting him. Mama accuses him of fleeing to a village of cowards when asked by Iyalode (a character whose name is also her title). She is the most revered woman in the community, bar the queen, because she holds a chieftaincy title which allows her to sit in the midst of other male chiefs: "Iyalode: I see. But where is the man who calls our daughter wife? Mama: The Abore said after consulting Ifa, Ifa revealed that he fled to Gbalefefe, a village of cowards. I believe he should have his testicles fed to the fat cats of this palace. The fool fled at the brandishing of a sword" (52). Mama's reply strips him of all his

masculine dignity and integrity. Firstly, she claims that he is a coward; as a coward, a man who runs away at the brandishing of a sword – a supposed characteristic of a women – Ajibade does not deserve to be called a man. Secondly, she advocates that as punishment for this lapse, his testicles (as symbol of his manhood) should be severed from him and fed to the palace cats. This type of complicit support of patriarchy exemplified by women in the play explains how women find themselves supporting patriarchy and social prejudices either consciously or not. Mama's call for the cutting off of Ajibade's testicles echoes the contempt with which the king treats Ajibade and the continuous elevation of the king's status against the dignity and manliness of a fellow man.

The degree of pressure on men to be 'manly' and heroic is given great emphasis in the play, culminating in the final scenes when Iyalode and Mama – Ilari's wife - both go to Ajibade at Gbalefefe to persuade him to return to his village for his customary duty. Mama's way of persuading him to perform his duty is a reminder of conventional ideas of masculinity. She reminds him of his masculinist responsibilities which includes his duties to his wife. "Go like a man and spare my daughter's life". She continues in this mood by singing praise songs to him:

> Lala!
>
> Apajara
>
> Olokun ola
>
> Aroju bobaku
>
> Omo abiku kan
>
> Bi eni rebi
>
> Afati le fa okun ola. (61)

In these lines, Mama eulogizes Ajibade using a series of traditional praise names which emphasizes the conventional understandings of masculinity as courageous, stoical and strong. The pressure becomes so much that he makes the decision to return home for the ritual. Since Ajibade is a man, he is supposed to be brave enough to face death without complaint irrespective of the fierceness or the nature of death. Although Mama sings these praise names to indulge Ajibade's sense of himself as manly and heroic, in the context of his refusal to carry out his duty, these praise names become a form of ridicule and mockery which shamefully and disgracefully Ajibade has to face

and repel. To repel these charges, therefore, he has to bow to pressure to return home and commit the ritual suicide – all to prove his masculinity.

At this point, it is useful to extrapolate from some of the general sayings among the Yoruba people: *ibi lie lan bo'mo'kunrin* commonly translated as (the male child should be found at the toughest places) and *okunrin la'da* (man is steel) are different ways of articulating the common belief that it is the duty of the male child to do the most difficult task around. These proverbs continue to emphasize the immense effect which culture has on who or what a man should be and the fact that, just like femininity, masculinity is nurtured by the society. The Yoruba male child who grows up hearing his parents, elders in the community and his peers mentioning and repeating the above proverbs will grow up seeing himself as wholly distinct from the female child and will probably bow to masculinist pressures because of this upbringing. And since the society does not consist only of the male sex, whatever pressure, social, cultural or religious that is put on the male will invariably resonate on the female.

In all of Yerima's plays discussed in this study, his aim is to arrive at what Jerrold Hogle calls "post-patriarchy". Writing on the need for texts written and taught to aim towards gender inequality, Hogle declares that: "every text read and taught, [in] whatever the era and [by] whoever the author, [should] move us a step further towards post-patriarchy" (1988:99). Post-patriarchy in this instance is a state or situation in the world when all forms of sexism, feminism, homophobia and other forms of gender discrimination and binary thinking become a thing of the past. Yerima's *Abobaku* aims not only at a post-patriarchal world, it also targets a post-feminist world – a world where there would be no reason to discuss feminism, where everyone whatever their gender is seen and treated equally. Yerima's twofold focus on the oppression of women and men is an important means of furthering these aims. As a feminist himself, his gender-sensitive reordering of the Ooni Sijuade's story will come as no shock to scholars who are familiar with his work. This is because his interest in the nuances of culture, tradition and religion in respect to how these affects human existence is prominent in the majority of his plays. He has thus developed a reputation for writing about the oppression and abuse of women, something which is not common among many male Nigerian writers. His ability to also see through how culture oppresses subordinate men makes his literary preoccupations with gender a more wholistic one. Having

explored the way in which men are oppressed through Yoruba religious practices, I will now turn my attention to the play's treatment of the oppression of women.

"Being born a Woman": Faramola's version of Being a Woman

Abobaku's definition of a woman is similar to what *Aetu* depicts. Although in the latter, the definition of a woman is presented as both enjoyable and sad, it nevertheless, uses Aetu's experience to define womanhood as sad. In *Abobaku* likewise, women are depicted as subservient and under the control of men. The play makes it clear that Faramola's life and death depends on that of her husband, and Mama's emotional and sexual life freezes up because of her husband's – Ilar's - castration. To begin this enquiry, I will start with Faramola's reflections about herself as a woman. She engages with the question of womanhood and the related question of the construction of the female sex when she vividly expresses her regrets at being born a woman: "If only I had known that being born a woman will be so difficult, I would have begged Obatala, the god of creation, not to let me come this way" (41). Faramola's statement here seem to be an antithesis of De Beauvoir's famous comment: one is not born a woman but becomes one (1949). For Faramola, one can be born a woman, however, it is a difficult experience to be one. To her, being a female is "difficult" because her life has to depend on the discretion of a man or men and because she has to live her life to satisfy men. Faramola's point of view is usefully contrasted with Aetu's much more mystical and affirming view explored in Chapter Two. As Aetu states,

> To be a woman is to be one with the universe. To give life to the universe, to enjoy and serve the pleasures of life … to bear the joy and pain of being the vehicle of life. Orunmila, Baba Ifa, the god of wisdom says that, to be a woman is to be wise as Orunmila, smart as Esu, strong as Sango, and weak as Obirin, all at the same time, while still endowed with the charms and purity of Obatala (40-41).

While Aetu links a woman with the gods, Faramola concludes that her life as a woman is hardly worth living. This difference in views links to the heteroglossic qualities of the texts, suggesting an inconclusive, even contradictory position. Like *Aetu*, this play can be understood as polyphonic, thus presenting different, sometimes contradictory views. This is also evident in Western feminist theory. As Elaine Showalter declares, "gender is far, however, from reaching a state of consensus ... there is vigorous intellectual debate about the construction of gender, and the way it should be

used by scholars and critics" (1989:3). And within Africa as a continent itself, many gender theories such as African womanism, Motherism and Stiwanism have arisen with the aim of shedding alternative perspectives on different aspects of African heterogeneity and uniqueness. This proves that it will be difficult to arrive at a unified philosophy or theory of gender, a difficulty which is also made evident in Yerima's plays.

Faramola's understanding of womanhood as subordinate and 'other' is apparent right from the beginning of the play and continues throughout. As a character, she enjoys not a single moment of happiness but rather is portrayed as a sad, weak, and subordinate character whose life is tossed in different directions depending on what happens to her husband. A particularly important moment in the play is when she presents herself for the sacrifice in the place of her husband. Iyalode and Mama have been ordered to fetch Ajibade from his room so that he can perform the ritual sacrifice. It is in this moment that Faramola laments the state of a woman and the role that has been accorded her by the phallocentric world. When it has become known within the palace that Kabiyesi had passed away, Mama and Iyalode are sent to Faramola to prepare for her husband's sacrifice. But she is reluctant knowing that her husband had ran away to Gbalefefe:

> Mama: Daughter, please make this one last sacrifice, then come home with me.
>
> Faramola: (Chuckles. Laughs loudly) Sacrifice. Indeed, we are sacrifices then … figurines … made-up dolls … puppets of a doomed circus. Frail, weaklings, instruments of an ungrateful people who use us to balance the argument between good and bad.
>
> Iyalode: Rhetorics … sweet words which may not add up in our unbalanced world. Mother, did you not prepare your child for the plunge she was about to make before she took her wedding vows? (43).

Images of inanimate objects such as figurines, made-up dolls and puppets suggest both women's objectification and her insignificance in the grander scheme of things. The other disturbing phrase used by Faramola to describe women is "puppets of a doomed circus". Puppets are models, prototypes and marionettes used mostly in theatrical performances and which are manipulated and controlled by others thus the metaphor is suggestive of women's lack of agency. The fact that she associates these puppets with a 'doomed' circus amplifies her view that women are doomed anyway and that their lives are controlled by others. Just as objects are doomed in the hands of their controller who can decide to discard, break or change them whenever they like, the woman

likewise is doomed because the man can decide at any time to do whatever he pleases with her. These views represent Faramola's standpoint regarding womanhood and femininity.

Yerima's presentation of Faramola presents his view on gender hegemony and the fact that men tend to use women to satisfy their selfish needs. He makes a similar point in his interview with Julius Adeoye. Discussing his play, *The Wives* (2007), he describes his aim in the play as "[showing] man [as] callous and powerful [with] traditionally supported power to use human beings, especially women around them" (2013:225). In an analogous fashion, Faramola concludes her speech by saying women have been reduced to the status of an instrument which is used to "balance the argument between good and bad" (43). What she alludes to here is the fact that women have not only been left to gratify men's pleasures but also must take the blame when difficulties arise. Thus, the woman carries the burden of "balancing" both the good and the bad. As I go on to argue, it is obvious that Mama has prepared her daughter well enough to face societal gender demands but, as the play suggests, no amount of preparation can sanction women's escape from the demands of patriarchy.

The play also places emphasis on the position of women as 'relative creatures', only perceived through their attachment to their husbands if they are married. This idea is suggested in Faramola's response to the official report of the king's passing on, which also means that her husband has to immediately follow the king:

> Just the closure of someone's eyelids, a last breath … and my fate changes? From that of an expectant doting beloved wife to that of a widow. Pity. Indeed, sorrow and happiness are the heresies of virtue. (42)

Despite being a doting wife (a position of femininity which is demanded by culture) and being loved by her husband, she still has to experience sorrow and regret. Even after keeping to traditional demands, she still has no joy. Her reward for accepting and keeping to the confined role of being a doting wife is that she will soon become a widow. She concludes this speech by re-stating and re-affirming the Taoist phrase: "sorrow and happiness are the heresies of virtue". With all the virtues that she has been taught to keep and that she has kept, all that she receives are the twin emotions of pain and sorrow. These two emotions are part of life and, despite her upbringing and cultural conditioning, she still does not escape the scourge of gender discrimination.

The climactic moment of the play comes when Faramola decides to take the place of her husband. She does so because her husband suddenly decides to renege on his duty as the *abobaku*. Some of the reasons for her decision are to be found in her religious beliefs: like other dwellers of the Adeoti village, Faramola believes that someone has to escort the dead king to the place of the ancestors so as to avoid communal tragedy. Since her husband has absconded from the village thereby avoiding the ritual sacrifice, the general belief in the community is that calamities, famine and inexplicable disasters will befall the village. This, because the king has been left to wander around unaccompanied. To prevent these calamities therefore, she needs to present herself as ransom. Her decision also stems from a desire to prevent shame and disgrace from falling upon her family, a situation that will continue for generations to come, thus denying the family the possibility of future progress. Also, this death will save her unborn child from being born into the family of *abobaku* since the duty is hereditary. If the child is born a male, he will automatically be an *abobaku* and consequently, becoming a lesser person to the king just like his father has been.

For the various reasons outlined above, Faramola's gesture is regarded as honourable by villagers and herself. The character herself refers to it as "death of honour" because, if she and her child continue to live, they will also continue "to be at the whims of another. [And so,] it is best [the child remains] encrypted in the cocoon of [her] womb, and not live" (65). By giving her life as a sacrifice, Faramola assumes heroic status in this community as a woman who takes the place of a man; she also reverses traditional gender norms by 'performing' a role normally allocated to men. As I have suggested above, the play gives credence to the argument that patriarchal society enforces stifling gender norms. At the same time, by contemplating the possibility of a female *abobaku*, it also suggests that these roles are not fixed. If presented with the same opportunities, men or women, the play asserts, can perform similar roles.

The play also touches on the normative requirement of femininity in Yoruba society when Faramola laments how her mother had taught her how to grow as a woman. Faramola alludes to her mother's training in conventional gender norms in the scene when rumours within the palace point toward the king's death which means that Ajibade has to die. Her response to this upbringing is sad as she realizes that all her effort to live as stipulated by her mother have come to naught: "Was I wrong? You told me that as a woman, I was to grow up well, protect my virtue, find a man, fall in love and find happiness. I followed every word you said. Now see my expected joy turn into

a pool of sadness with an overflow of pain" (19). Like many other young Yoruba women, she is mentored to ensure that she grows up to be a pleaser of men. She is told by her mother to "grow up well", which means that she must follow the doctrines and teachings that will be preached to her, doctrines which are nurtured by the society; it means that Faramola must keep her body for the purpose of satisfying the man that will become her husband. In saying this, the woman is made to become a slave of her body. Simone de Beauvoir, cited by Judith Butler, condemns this act by proposing that "the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence" (Butler, 1990:16). Faramola is also asked to "protect her virtue" which means that she should grow up to be a woman who is undefiled until the day she gets married to her husband. These also reaffirm Butler's precise observations on the woman's body in relation to culture. Butler condemns the fact that "the [woman's] body is figured as a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related" (12). The culture of Adeoti village demands the chastity of women's body as a means of satisfying the dominance of men. And Mama has been acculturated into these norms and it becomes her duty to pass it down to her daughter.

Mama's training also includes the assumption that she will get married. She must "find a man" in order to make her life complete. Mama concludes her conservative sermon to her daughter by asserting that if she fulfills all the requirements of womanhood, she will "find happiness". Pressured by the requirements of gender norms, she accepts the view that life would be meaningless and unfulfilling if she rejects the 'codes' her mother had given her. But after she "followed every word" of her mother's advice, she is overcome by "sadness and overflow of pain".

Faramola's caustic assessment of women's social position is to some extent at questions the some of the ideals of African womanism. For instance, African womanism seeks to grant value to African cultural systems because African cultures are not totally oppressive to women. However, from the perspective of play, there is no benefit in being a woman. Faramola's perception of a woman also contradicts Catherine Acholonu's notion of motherism which accentuates and values the role of a woman as a mother and nurturer. This links with the fact that the role or responsibility of a woman as a mother is highly regarded especially in the African setting. However, rather than stay alive to become a mother, Faramola sacrifices both her life and the life of her unborn child. As suggested by Faramola's story, the play thus seem to go against both traditional views of

motherhood and the theory of motherism as the protagonist's experiences offer. The ideology of femininity just like masculinity is in its nature externally developed rather than internally (biological) imbued. At the end of the play however, there is an obvious victory for women.

This section on the play's exploration of women's experience within patriarchy would be incomplete if it failed to mention the customary demand that the queen has to subject herself to. Even as the most respected female in the village of Adeoti, she is degraded by the demand of tradition which requires her to have sexual intercourse with Ajibade as a prelude to his death. Sex with the queen is understood as a respectable and honourable reward for his service. At the expense of the queen's dignity, Ajibade is invited to taste and enjoy what the king had enjoyed before he takes up his task of escorting the king. In performing this degrading customary rite, the queen becomes, as Faramola has noted earlier, an object in the hands of men. She becomes an object used to fulfil the requirements of tradition. As I have argued, Yerima's narrative challenges these various traditional gender constructions and calls for them to end. This is made especially clear in the resolution of the play when the new Oba decides to abolish the position of *abobaku* during his reign. The total rejection of the practice of *abobaku* by the new king is Yerima's way of challenging the practices that have for centuries been allowed to continue to oppress lower or weaker men and women in a traditional Yoruba community.

To complete this section of this study, I quote a statement by the playwright from the author's note. This statement summarizes the essence of this section as to how men's decisions and established rules, even though these rules are meant to be followed by women, are always taken from men's selfish point of view. Yerima says: "the woman is my primary thematic concern here. How we men leave heavy burdens for them to carry due to our thoughts that often evolve from self" (6). Yerima confirms, affirms and reaffirms what he has explored in the play by stating that that all men's selfish decisions put heavy burdens on women. Furthermore, given the fact that men continue to hold positions of social dominance and continue to be what Connell calls "gatekeepers" of patriarchy, and given that men continue to have near autonomy over the institutions that can liberate oppressed women, women's struggles for emancipation must continue. Speaking about the gatekeepers, Connell makes the following point:

> The very gender inequalities in economic assets, political power, and cultural authority, as well as the means of coercion, that gender reforms intend to change, currently mean that

> men (often specific groups of men) control most of the resources required to implement women's claims for justice. Men and boys are thus in significant ways gatekeepers for gender equality. (Connell, 2005:1801)

The questions now are, how did they manage to make themselves the gatekeepers? Why should there be a gate in the first place? And are men ready to open the gate? According to my reading, Yerima's plays suggest that men should open the metaphorical gate.

Assaulting our Ancestors: Female Heroism

Alice Eagly and Selwyn Becker define heroism as "voluntarily risking physical injury or death in the service of one or more other people, despite the possibility of dying or suffering serious physical consequences from these actions" (2005:343). According to Lee Edwards, "If class, wealth, and immediate success are ultimately less important determinants of heroic stature than we commonly believe, so too is sexual identity" (1979:35). Eagly and Becker's definition of heroism embodies the function of service and the risk of service as the prerequisites of heroism, but Edwards brings in the question of gender while effectively stating the irrelevance of gender in heroism. From these different perspectives on heroism, one can claim that if a service encompasses the requirement of Eagly and Becker, it is heroic irrespective of the sex of the hero. While many literary tragic heroes have been male protagonists, a number of them such as the protagonists of *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ (1978), *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker (1982), *Joan of Arc* by Mark Twain (1989), *Iyemoja* by Ahmed Yerima, (2001) are female. The authors above generally recognize that the human society needs to give equal honour to the female heroines as much as the male and so, wrote literary works in order to prove this.

For Yerima, the society has not created the space for female heroism. Because of this understanding therefore, he correspondingly endeavours to create female heroes in his work. In some of his plays such as *The Sick People* (2000) and *Akuabata* (2008), he provides further examples of this stance as they all tell stories of powerful women who are impeded by different social, familial or traditional stumbling blocks. These stumbling blocks are put in places by men because of their inability to accept women's equality and independence. Yerima makes this point in an interview with Julius Adeoye:

> The female hero for me is a contradiction within the Nigerian reality. It is a contradiction in the sense that the modern 'you and I' want the woman to be independent, we want the woman to be powerful, to be educated and yet, we have created traditional stumbling blocks on her path. The more we empower her, the more other stumbling block we put before her … That is my painful process of presenting woman within the feminist angle. The society creates room for her to grow but it also creates traditional stumbling blocks. And when the stumbling blocks are not there, the husbands – if they are married, create the stumbling blocks … These are the problems that my women (women in my plays) encounter. (Yerima quoted in Adeoye, 2013: 225-226)

In this argument, Yerima reflects on what is realistically obtainable in the society from where he takes his stories. It reflects on the paradox that although, there seems to be strong support for gender and other forms of equality in Nigeria, this support is also undermined by the many restrictions placed on women's emancipation. Thus, Yerima concludes that society is ambivalent about the independence of women. In the context of the play, *Abobaku*, the people praise Faramola for being *'aya' baba kekere*' (wife of the small king), but they still block her chance of assuming a position of responsibility and honour.

As a result of Faramola's determination to become a hero without being conscious of it, she puts on the *abobaku* attire, which directly means that she is replacing Ajibade's life with hers. At this point in the narrative, chief Balogun and Abore do not know that Ajibade had disappeared. At the sight of Faramola claded in the garments meant for *abobaku*, this interchange occurs between them:

> Balogun: Turn Baba Kekere … Oba Karunwi awaits your presence. Already, he hears your footsteps approach. Serve him well there as you have here. (He goes to Faramola and turns her face to him) *Paga*! *Eewo*! A woman dons the garb of a masquerade. She assaults our ancestors.
>
> Abore: (Moves closer.) Woman, why did you enter the shrine room of death? Why? (Pause. She smiles.) See the ignorant buffoon smile. See how she looks like a comic *sigidi* pelted by raindrops displayed at the palace court. What do you think this is, woman? A game for stupid girls?
>
> Balogun: What is the world turning into? When women don the evil spirit and garb of death to take on the task of men. By this one act, she has tainted our service to the people in faeces and bad odour. *Eewo*! What do we do now? (45)

From the chauvinist conversation, we understand how the men are threatened by Faramola's change of role. This one act challenges the status quo and so these men consider it an assault on their ancestors. This suggests that when women challenge the existing state of affairs, men are threatened and interpret it as an assault on them and on their traditions. Balogun questions this audacity on the part of Faramola by asking: "what is the world turning into? When women don the evil spirit and garb of death to take on the task meant for men". For Balogun and Abore, Faramola has done the worst by taking on the task meant for men and therefore deserves to be swallowed by the Oro cult. Balogun repeats the word "Eewo!" twice to affirm his definition of Faramaola's audacity as desecration and blasphemy. From this cultural and religious points of view, we observe that when women attempt to take up tasks from which they are excluded, men are threatened by this as it challenges their masculinity and sense of superiority, thus distorting what has been 'ordained by the gods'. However, by taking on the role, Faramola goes on to achieve a status she would rather not have achieved had she not been courageous enough to take up a sacrificial and heroic role meant for the *abobaku*. Yerima's desire to make the female in this play the hero, is met by the unsupportive traditional system.

Despite Faramola's gender and her "otherness", she decides to perform the heroic act of offering her life as a substitute for her husband's and as an escort of the dead king. The patriarchal Yoruba culture disqualifies the female from 'abobakuhood' however, the 'man' who has been saddled with this 'great duty' (because he is a man) escapes, leaving his responsibility in the hands of his "doting wife". Ironically, Ajibade has enjoyed every influence and affluence that is accorded a man of his caliber but when the time comes for him to perform the duty that has been given to him, he disappoints. Instead, the "rejected stone" (using the biblical parable) in the person of Faramola, the woman, courageously steps into his shoes and confidently performs this duty. While this act of self-sacrifice leads to her death, it can also be understood as confirming the fact that, if given an equal ground, women can achieve as much as men.

Yerima underlines this concept of heroism through a symbolic and metaphoric connection between Faramola and Jesus Christ. Just like Jesus Christ, innocent Faramola becomes an agent of redemption for the community which rejects her. Jesus Christ died for the sinful world, and Faramola dies for the domineering 'men's world'. A soliloquy delivered by Faramola consolidates this symbolic similarity between Jesus and Faramola:

> There you are, Jesus, the saviour. Here am I, see me. I wish I could be as clear in my head as when you were on the cross ready to die. My head is filled up. One half is full of nothing but how to seek salvation for the man I love. I know I am right for you are the God of love. On the other hand, you are also the God of sacrifice ... why did you not run away? Why did you stay to be killed? Why did you give your life to save the world? Which world? This disdainful, uncaring world? (44)

From her speech, Faramola seems to equate or try to parallel herself and her sacrifice with that of Jesus Christ in the bible. As Jesus is the saviour of the world so too is Faramola the saviour of her people. Unlike Jesus however, Faramola's "head is filled up": she is indecisive and confused. In addition, where Jesus is full of forgiveness for an ignorant world, she calls the world "disdainful and uncaring". While Jesus saw men as guilty and in need of forgiveness, Faramola's desire is to judge them for their wrongdoing. However, despite these differences, their functions as sacrifices for the greater good are symbolically identical. Faramola's sacrifice as a means of saving the life of her husband and thus preserving the continuing existence and sustenance of her people is compared to Jesus' sacrificial death which aims at saving the whole world. This intertextual association works to present this woman's action as a powerful example of female strength and sense of duty. In this way, although she is a victim in the play, she becomes a victor for finally restoring salvation to her husband, her people and the king who is not left to go to the abode of the ancestors without being escorted. As argued earlier, her death can be interpreted as an unconventional sacrifice of the female for the good of others (thus also linking to the sacrifice of her husband) but rather as a heroic feat which establishes women's equality with men. In this way, the play shares an affinity with the sacrifices described in *Aetu*. In *Aetu,* the death of Aetu brings an end to the practice of wife inheritance – a practice which the play criticizes. And in *Abobaku* likewise, the practice of *abobaku* comes to an end as the incoming Oba promises to abolish it.

The heroic and redemptive power that is bestowed upon Faramola in this play can be interpreted as the playwright's efforts to give the woman a powerful status that she deserves even though he claims the society does not create an environment for the heroic female. In a striking move, the role and responsibility of redeemer, saviour and hero which the society has principally ascribed to man is shifted to the woman. What is suggested through the comparison with the figure of Jesus Christ, is that Faramola gains the kind of stature and dignity that would not have been available to her in ordinary circumstances.

In addition to the comparison between Faramola and Jesus Christ, the play also draws attention to another sacrificial narrative in the bible which involves Abraham and the sacrifice of his son, Isaac. Faramola laments, "Like Abraham, I am called upon to give up my only love … my husband … my only son" (44). The reference to Abrahamic's sacrifice of Isaac also confirms a reading of Faramola's actions in positive terms. This biblical allusion serves an important purpose in Yerima's presentation of Faramola's death as a vindication of womanhood since it provides for the salvation of the people whom the king has left behind.

Because of numerous agitations for equality in all human spheres in the country, the government of Nigeria has taken giant steps towards achieving gender equality in the country. The continuous clamouring by proponents of gender equality within and outside Nigeria, and international regulatory bodies which control equal human rights, have encouraged the Nigerian government to take various steps to ensure an egalitarian society for its citizens. Nigeria is one of the few countries which boasts of a special ministry in the federation which focuses exclusively on the concerns of women and the attainment of gender equality. The Nigerian Ministry of Women Affairs describes its roles as follows:

> [It helps] build a Nigerian Society that guarantees equal access to social, economic and wealth creation opportunities to all, irrespective of gender, places premium on protection of the child, the aged and persons with disabilities; focuses attention of key operators in both private and public sectors on mainstreaming the concerns of these groups of people in national development process (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development).

Going on the efforts put in by the government and other private parastatals within the country, one would be tempted to assume that the country has been able to overcome gender inequality or that this inequality has been significantly reduced. However, as Yerima's remarks suggest, the problem persists. The same society that criticizes women oppression paradoxically is responsible for the creation of these inequalities and continues to perpetuate them. And just like Yerima's statement, the "female hero" cannot be made since it is the society that pushes her up which is also responsible for pulling her down. Despite his unenthusiastic acceptance that the female hero cannot be created in literature because the society where she lives does not create the space, Yerima deconstructs social generic boundaries by creating a Jesus-like female character as a way of declaring the capabilities of the female gender to be heroic, thereby installing women as agents of redemption.

In addition to the biblical intertextual allusions discussed above, Yerima's *Abobaku* also makes striking reference to, or mimics, Wole Soyinka's 1975 classic, *Death and the King's Horseman*. While both plays are obvious products of the Yoruba mythic system, Yerima's *Abobaku* published forty years after *Death and The King's Horseman* is more gender-sensitive in nature. Although both plays are inspired by real historical events, they follow different paths and get to similar yet different destinations. The point of convergence in both plays is their engagement with both the importance of the *abobaku* practice to the Yoruba people as well as its human implications. In both plays, the kings end up being escorted by more than one *abobaku* each. And rather than opting for a simple resolution, they pose difficult questions about the continuing relevance of the practice. Where the plays diverge, however, is in their engagement with questions of gender. Specifically, Yerima makes Faramola, a woman, the hero in his play and also presents Ajibade as a lesser man and a fallen hero. This contrasts with Soyinka's presentation of Elesin Oba as just a fallen hero while the heroic status is given to his son Olunde. In Soyinka's case, the heroic status is taken from a fallen male and given to another male, a masculinist/patriarchal gesture for which he has been criticized repeatedly. Yerima, by contrast, transfers the heroic status from a fallen man to a worthy woman. Finally, Yerima concludes by proposing an end to the practice because it is oppressive – a resolution which is not present in Soyinka's play.

Death and the King's Horseman is one of Soyinka's most renowned plays. On his winning the Nobel laureate for literature in 1986, the play's artistic and 'heartistic' grandeur was specifically mentioned. The play is about a man, Elesin Oba, who is the king's *abobaku*. Just like Ajibade, he fails to perform his duties after having enjoyed all the benefits that are associated with his office. Soyinka does not focus on the gender concerns arising from this story. Like several of his contemporaries, such as Chinua Achebe and Ola Rotimi, he has been criticized for his insensitivity to the treatment of women in his plays and novels, especially those of the early period (Boyce Davies 1986, Smith 1986, Akogbeto and Koukpossi 2015). But because of his passion for gender equality, Yerima attempts to fashion the story toward a more gender-sensitive standpoint. In so doing, he adds a new and different dimension to the practiceof *abobaku*. The importance of this perspective in the Yoruba traditional set-up is that, when attention is not given to the woman, when her significance is left unacknowledged, her ability and knowledge is jeopardized and left stunted.

Having analysed how gender is negotiated in *Abobaku*, a text authored by a male writer, I would like to touch briefly on the position of those women feminists who regard men who write about gender issues as gatecrashers. Australian critic, Meaghan Morris, for instance, condemns male feminists when she says, "men have no business in feminism, when they have nothing but business therein" (1987:180). Critics like Morris believe that men who participate in feminist discussions do so from a range of motives other than achieving gender equality which is the sole aim of women feminist writers. Even though Yerima is not as famous as Chimamanda Adichie, he has written plays which share similar themes and aims as Adichie. Therefore, his deliberate questioning and criticism of pre-colonial traditional practices which suppress, and abuse women is not with the aim of "business" as Morris claims but to foster equality between the sexes.

Even though a male writer, Yerima condemns any form of gender oppression arising from cultural and religious practices. From Faramola's regret at being born a woman to the ridiculing of the queen as she is forced to offer her body to satisfy the *abobaku* as custom demands, none of the three women in the play enjoys a moment of joy. From *Abobaku* therefore, we do not see men negotiating or recognizing the women, nor do we see women negotiating with men. We also discover that Kabieyi is depicted as all-powerful while the women and other lower men are depicted as inferior. From this therefore, we can deduce that Yerima takes a different path from the nego-feminist perspective. This suggests that Yerima's plays do not come to rigid conclusions in his treatment of women and gender inequality. With *Aetu* and *Little Drops*, women collaborate with men at the end of the stories to find a unified solution to the practices oppressing women, but in this play, the man who own men completely dominates all his subordinates including men and women. This lack of absolute certainty from these plays forms the crux of what is covered in the last chapter of this study.

Conclusion

The reading of *Abobaku* renders a necessary and timely exploration of the various ways in which men have been left to 'suffer and die in silence' as a result of various gender-related pressures from culture, tradition and religion. Of specific concerns in the play are the various kinds of degradation that both Ajibade and Ilari are made to undergo in the name of religion. These 'men'

put on a stoical face while performing their duties acting like they are pleased with their conditions; as if they are capable of coping with the degrading duties bestowed upon them. However, as the play suggests, they prove unable to continue the charade. This suggests that men are pressured by societal demands to take up unbearable roles. In addition to the focus on subordinate masculinities and the oppression of men in cultural systems, the play's negotiation of gender also includes the unavoidable boomerang effects of the oppression of men on the women with whom they are associated. Faramola and Mama are characters whose difficult situations arise directly as a result of their association or relation with men – Ajibade and Ilari respectively. The ripple effect of these men's oppression on their wives suggest that the pressure put on men by society tends to facilitate women's woe as men always want to maintain their chauvinistic status as 'men'.

Yerima's perspective on the actual incident of Oba Sijuade's passing is also creative. What the play suggests is that highly placed people tend to exploit those in the lower classes of their particular societies irrespective of their gender. Yerima's ability to present this almost unexplored terrain of gender is not only relevant; it becomes a necessary and important contribution to the study of gender especially in Africa. Kabiyesi's death in the play spells the end of the life of fellow men in Ajibade, and Ilari. This is a tragedy for their families as the king's death resulted in the deaths of three other characters. Yerima's emphasis on the activities of "those who own men" (6) on the men they own brings out an aspect of gender study which has not been critically researched. This is a shift from the more pronounced 'male-oppress-female aspect of gender study. The play is thus able to avoid what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls the "single story", a situation where a story, idea or concept is continuously emphasized in a narrow-minded way thus preventing efforts to look deeply, or extensively to see the other side(s) of the story. *Abobaku* does not dwell only on the oppression of the female but also reflects on the fact that some male persons within the Yoruba culture oppress other male individuals in subordinate positions. Therefore, Yerima's artistic and meaningful rendition of *Abobaku* makes it a force to reckon with. It also gives another view or perspective to gender discourse that can be further richly explored.

Lastly, the similarity between the play's resolution and the plays explored in the previous chapters is worth mentioning. *Aetu* concludes with Kande's statement which asks that all practices that bring a woman under the oppression of a man must come to a stop. *Little Drops* also has a similar resolution. Kuru promises to offer all he has in order to see a Gbarambatu where everyone is equal,

and peace is restored. Likewise, in this play, the Obalola (king in waiting) also declares to the elders that during his reign, there would be no *abobaku*. This is a dramatic allusion to the real story of the present Ooni of Ife who has sidelined some of the ancestral and traditional practices of the Ife royal tenets. The deliberate inclusion of this proposition in this play suggests that, as in *Aetu*, Yerima's conclusion is a call for a stop to any and every oppressive practice meted out on both men and women. And in the case of *Abobaku,* the practice of tying a man's life to that of another whether 'superior' or not, is required to stop. While both *Aetu* and *Little Drops* can be largely positioned within the ideals of nego-feminism, *Abobaku* seem to offer a something different. It does not align with the tenets of Afro-centric feminism of negotiation and accommodation, but neither does it allude to western feminism. It seems to project an alternative understanding of feminism. My understanding of *Abobaku* and its feminist disposition underscores my initial observation that literary works themselves could serve as theoretical sites. The play's neglect of both negotiation feminism and radica feminism seems to posit that feminism is a relatitivist concept: hence, Faramola's rejection of the definition of African femininity and enforced masculinity powered by patriarchy, at the same time.

CHAPTER FIVE: EXPLORING GENDER IN *SO WHAT'S NEW? WEEMEN* AND *FLIGHT FROM MAHABARATH*

As stated earlier, this project undertakes a comparative study of the negotiation of gender and patriarchy in selected examples of contemporary drama from Nigeria and South Africa. In the previous three chapters, I offered a close reading and analysis of three different plays by Nigerian playwright, Ahmed Yerima, arguing that Yerima's concerns with gender place particular emphasis on the influence of different agents such as culture, tradition and religion as determinants of gender roles and practices. I also interrogated how historical and contemporary practices sustain various forms of discrimination, oppression and abuse based on one's gender. In this chapter, and the one that succeeds it, I introduce and discuss selected examples of South African drama which can be classified as post-transitional considering the explanation of this concept earlier. These plays are analysed in relation to the same set of gender-related concerns explored in previous chapters. As I go on to argue, instead of focusing, as Yerima does, on historical-cultural agents, these plays address the forms of sexism, gender inequality and gender-based violence which characterize the post-transitional South African context. In this chapter, the focus falls on a number of plays written and performed in the early 1990s, a period that marked the end of the apartheid era and which was characterized by euphoria following the nation's new-found democracy. These plays, which were originally written at the tail end of apartheid or what has come to be known as transitional period in some section and post-transitional period (basically written in periods after the TRC), for those plays which were published after the initiation of the TRC were subsequently collected in the anthology, *Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays* (1998) edited by Kathy Perkins. This collection includes Fatima Dike's *So What's New?* (1993), Mthali Thulani's *Weemen* (1996) and Muthal Naidoo's *Flight from the Mahabharath* (1998).

Nigeria and South Africa, the two nations from whence the selected texts in this study emerged, share similar theatrical origins embedded in ritual and festival activities. However, subsequent theatrical developments in these countries have been conspicuously different. Nigeria's theatre was mostly influenced by oral tradition up until the 18th century when written literature in local languages emerged. In the 20th century, Nigerian literature and theatre began circulating beyond the nation, gradually gaining recognition outside Nigeria. The detail of this journey has been recorded in the earlier part of this study. As in the case of Nigerian literature, South African literature was uniquely affected by its political history which can be described as the prolonged

stay of the western colonizer in the country. Writing about the influence of European colonial intrusion into the South African cultural order, Keith Bain, South African drama critic, makes the following important point:

> Whereas indigenous performance practices focused on sustaining a particular way of life through the ritual enactments of culturally significant memories, western colonization brought with it the notion of theatrical performance. European colonialism, and the eventual institutionalization of apartheid, resulted in the widespread decimation of traditional indigenous cultural practices. Existing social institutions were marginalized and sidelined, ridiculed as inferior or primitive, while the tenets of Western cultural authority – foreign languages and religious beliefs – were imposed as official, dominant and superior. (2003:147)

Bain's argument confirms that South African theatre, like that of its Nigerian counterpart, was similar in its shift from indigenous performance practices to a more western-influenced style. In the post-apartheid period, playwrights such as Athol Fugard, Zakes Mda, Fatima Dike, Gcina Mhlophe, and John Kani have been important influences on South African drama. In the post-1994 or post-transitional period, the themes of apartheid and protest which dominated South African theatre in the past have been replaced with more current social issues such as gender, violence, economic inequality and politics. Bain describes this period as "a period of creative confusion, relaxation or inhibition [which] has tended to refocus a great deal of energy within an ever-expanding market of theatrical entertainment" (2003:149). Writing more generally about the literature of this post-transitional period, Frenkel and MacKenzie argue that it "is often unfettered to the past in the way that much apartheid writing was, but may still reconsider it in new ways. Equally, it may ignore it altogether. Other features include politically incorrect humour and incisive satire, and the mixing of genres with zest and freedom" (2010:2). This is also the view of American critic, Lena Slachmuijlder who points to the predominance of "contemporary social issues, previously politicized historical events, cultural treasures and personal stories" (1999:18).

All three plays discussed in this section explore some of the social themes of transitional and post-transitional periods. While the subject of racism is still pertinent, other questions of patriarchy, gender violence, religious bigotry, and class division are emergent themes. My argument in this chapter is that all three plays offer an explicit critique of patriarchal norms in South African society with a specific focus on what for the purpose of this study, I consider the post-apartheid South Africa. However, I suggest that where many of the previous plays analysed in this study could be

synchronous with the ideologies of African womanism and nego-feminism, the plays analysed here, although not absolutely are more usefully aligned with variants of western radical feminism.

It is a matter of interest to observe that all the plays studied in this thesis, seven of them in total, pay purposeful attention to gender through the device of gender representation. Only two plays, *Aetu* and *Abobaku* (both by Yerima) have as many male characters as female. For the rest, what is striking is that male characters are either rare or altogether absent. In *Little Drops* for instance, the only male character is Kuru, who appears at the end of the play. His duty is to find a lasting solution to the problem of patriarchy which has been created and perpetrated by men. In *At Her Feet* by Nadia Davids (discussed in Chapter 6) and *So What's New*?, both South African plays, there are no male characters at all. Similarly, in *Flight from the Mahabarath*, most of the characters are female. The two male characters in the play are allowed into the women's space because of their agreement to abide by the code of practice dictated by the women. The only exception to the rule is *Weemen* which has the fewest characters – just four speaking characters, a male and a female with two other characters – male and female with cameo roles. As I go on to argue, this gesture suggests a radical or separatist feminist position which imagines and calls for a world occupied and controlled by women in which men are either extinct or subdued. I begin my analysis of the three plays with Dike's *So What's New?*

Utopia, Reverse Sexism and Women's Independence in Fatima Dike's *So What's New?*

So What's New? premiered at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg in 1991 was directed by famous writer and director, Barney Simon. As far as I have been able to gather, there has been only one published performance of the play since its premiere. This was in 2011, almost two decades after its premiere. On this occasion, it was directed by young director, Princess Zinzi Mhlongo and also performed at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg. The play criticizes patriarchal depictions of women as subordinate and incomplete and attempts to redefine women as thoughtful and independent. In her introduction to the anthology Kathy Perkins rightly observes that, along with *Flight of the Mahabarath*, the play, is "about women's liberation. These plays "address independent women who are seeking their own identities in a male-dominated society". She goes further to observe that, "*Weemen* explores physical and mental spousal abuse … Instead of

remaining passive about their abuse, the women … seek a solution" (1998:5). In a review of the 2011 performance of the play, Chris Thurman agrees that the play portrays women's independence. However, he also argues that the play "reminds the audience that there is a tragic false consciousness underlying the characters' [independent and care-free] actions" (2011:1). He observes that the women "are also responsible for their own problems and, worse, complicit in reproducing the conditions under which they (and their communities) have suffered" (1). Thurman suggests that in their quests to be independent, which they successfully achieve, the women find themselves engaged in illegal businesses such as owning a shebeen (illegal alcohol shop), drug-selling and prostitution, thereby contributing to the social problems of the society. Thurman concludes his review by stating that "although the production ends with a celebratory performance of "Sisters Are Doing It for Themselves", [he] couldn't help feeling that these sisters are, ultimately, doing damage to themselves" (2). Thurman's view has some validity because of the women's foray into illegal business all in the quest to be finally independent. However, I must interject that the play's call for women's ownership, control of themselves and their lives both economically and romantically can be seen as a radical feminist move.

Another review of the performance by South African freelance writer and editor, Percy Zvomuya, in the *Mail & Guardian* online takes a more positive view of the same performance. Zvomuya praises the performance as being "a showcase of strong women … [who] exhibit strength in using whatever it is they have. For instance, Patricia puts her good looks and her sexuality to good use and the tough Dee, a shebeen queen, shows business acumen and good sense, which includes trying to keep her daughter from falling pregnant" (August 12, 2011: n.p). The quote above speaks to the focus of the play: women's conscious proactive moves in making the best out of the unpleasant condition in which society places them. It is intriguing to see the different frameworks through which these critics analyse the play. For Thurman, the play is problematic in the way it presents the women as illicit and complicit in societal decay. But for Zvomuya, these women did not create the conditions in which they are by themselves, they find themselves in these situations and are attempting to make the best of it. I will buttress Zvomuya's observation by stating that emphasis should be placed on the play's exploration of women's resistance to inequality and living in a society which places them as the "Other", rather than the subject of morality which Thurman seems to dwell upon.

As suggested above, given my interest in gender concerns and the plays' exploration of this topic, I will hinge this chapter on the theoretical concept of radical feminism, a western proposition against gender inequality which aims to uproot patriarchy from every fiber of the society. According to Canadian-American radical feminist Shulamite Firestone, "the end goal of [radical] feminist revolution must be, unlike that of [liberal feminism], not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself: genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally" (1970:11). Another radical feminist who sees patriarchy as the root of female oppression is American Ti-Grace Atkinson. Atkinson argues that "the need men have for the role of oppressor is the source and foundation of all human oppression" (2000:86). Another radical feminist who vehemently abhors patriarchy is American, Valerie Solanas, often seen as one of the most fearsome feminists of the 20th century. In her work, *SCUM Manifesto* – SCUM is an acronym for Society for Cutting Up Men – Solanas not only calls for the eradication of patriarchy but also for the eradication of men, as the visible phallic symbol of patriarchy. She suggests that men, as the roots and custodians of patriarchy, should be eliminated as that is the only way to eliminate patriarchy. The radical feminist bullishly declares: "eliminate men and women will shape up" (1978:14). These perspectives have been criticized, even by feminists (liberal feminists) themselves. Among these critics is American author Robert Bork who argues that:

> Radical feminism is the most destructive and fanatical movement to come down to us from the Sixties. This is a revolutionary movement … and it is meeting with considerable success. Totalitarian in nature, it is deeply antagonistic to traditional Western culture and proposes the complete restructuring of society, morality, and human nature. (1996:193)

As I go on to argue, the theoretical paradigm of radical feminism provides a striking departure from the more conventional ideologies of negotiation as foregrounded in other plays explored in this thesis.

Set in an unnamed township in apartheid South Africa, *So What's New?* is composed of eleven different scenes and employs a linear time structure and strong causality. It begins in Sis Dee's lounge where she, along with her friend Pat, are watching *The Bold and the Beautiful* on television. Sis Dee is a shebeen queen; she uses her house for a liquor store and bar. She is also the single mother of Mercedes, the youngest character in the play. Pat is a hairdresser but also claims to be an estate agent. She also secretly works as a prostitute. Like Dee and Pat, Pat's younger sister

Thandi, is also involved in an illicit business. She makes a living by selling hard drugs with Dee's boyfriend, Bra Willie. Mercedes, Dee's sixteen-year-old daughter, a school pupil, is also introduced in this scene. Mercedes is characterized as determined and strong-willed. Although her mother attempts to prevent her from having a boyfriend who is an anti-apartheid activist, she refuses to listen. Both Dee and Pat are single mothers who comfortably take care of their children. Thandi's animosity towards men leads to her not having a boyfriend or lover. Although she makes enough money to live a comfortable life, she lives a life of insecurity due to the nature of her job.

As the women watch the program, they become involved in a conversation where they depict the men in their lives as weak, dependent on women and unfaithful. Dee, in particular, questions men's waywardness by asking, "if men could have babies, would they sleep around as much as they do?" (1998:27). Dee insinuates that men's biological and social detachment from the labour of pregnancy, child birth and childcare makes them promiscuous. As the women are about to engage in a debate about Dee's question, Pat suddenly remembers a story:

> Pat: This reminds me of something I read in a magazine recently. Picture this: Bra Willie is polishing the floor on his knees, with a baby on his back. You come from work, throw your brief case on the sofa in the lounge, throw yourself over to grab the remote control and watch the news on the TV while you kick your shoes off one by one. Bra Willie comes and ever so gently peels your socks off while he makes sure that he is not standing in front of the screen. A hot cup of tea makes its way into your eager hands, you sip and swallow, no sugar. You tell bra Willie rudely that the tea has no sugar; he apologizes profusely as he makes his way into the kitchen to get the sugar, saying "Mama, I am so sorry, but I went to the clinic today and the doctor told me that I was pregnant again".
>
> Dee: Oooo, I'd love to finish this off. "Willie", I'd say, "besides being a bad housekeeper you're a bad cook and now you want to be a breeding machine. Unfortunately, I can't let you do that. Pack your bag and go home, tell your father I'll be coming to demand my lobola [dowry] back, I'm sure there are many men out there who could do what you have failed to do, better."
>
> Pat: Right on! Dee: Hey, that is reverse sexism. (*They fall about laughing*.). (27-28)

In the scenario that these characters paint here, they attempt to establish or imagine a world in which gender roles are reversed. In this reverse world, women are associated with the public world of work while the men keep the role of housekeeper, cook, and provide solace to the working woman. Having noted the importance of this switch of role, what is incorporated is the idea that the dominant party in this scenario views the other as inferior by speaking rudely, barking out

instructions and by considering the woman as property acquired through dowry payment. This conversation prompts a discussion about what one of the characters describes as "reverse sexism", a situation where the dominant sexist discriminatory techniques employed by men are taken up by women to show prejudices against men. In simpler terms, it is sexism or discrimination against men.

If sexism according to Peter Glick and Susan Fiske entails "a reflection of hostility toward women" (1996:491), reverse sexism then becomes a situation when hostility is directed toward men by women using the same strategies that men have used to discriminate against them. More specifically, it entails sexist actions, slurs and discrimination directed against men by women. Some scholars have argued against the validity of reverse sexism or "second sexism" as David Benatar calls it in his book, *The Second Sexism* (2012). These critics argue that reserve sexism is a mirage because discrimination against men and boys lacks societal, institutional and historical provisions and support. For example, Steve Bearman et al argue that reverse sexism is not a "meaningful phrase" because "while individual women or women as a whole may enact prejudicial biases towards specific men or toward men as a group, this is done so without the backing of a societal system of institutional power" (2009:14). Speaking further and using the US as an example, Bearman et al argue that "if our [US] economic and political infrastructures were run predominately by women, and if men's shelters were required to protect men from widespread abuse by their female partners, perhaps 'reverse sexism' would have the required institutional power to make it a meaningful phrase" (14). Feminist theorist Marilyn Frye also argues that "the locus of sexism is primarily in the system and framework, not in the particular act" (1983:19). Going by Frye's argument, reverse sexism might not necessarily be a sustainable or contextualised theory because of the absence of systemic and institutional frameworks. The scholars above have thus dismissed the validity of the notion of reverse sexism.

It is useful to consider how these arguments translate into the South African context. As the play suggests, black men such as those associated with Dee and her friends, have been forced to take up menial roles because of several factors which include but are not limited to their economic weakness due in part to the system of apartheid. Apartheid and its legacies have created a system in which many black men face economic incapacitation. Because of this, therefore, they cannot fully enjoy the benefits of patriarchy. In other words, the historical and economic power that the

white western male, or arguably the white South African man, enjoys is not the same as that of the black man in South Africa. This means that it is questionable to what extent the arguments about reverse sexism discussed above can be applied to the context of apartheid South Africa. On the other hand, these women's imagination of reversed sexism has no basis in reality. This reinforces both Frye's and Bearman et al's argument that due to the presence of systemic gender discrimination, reverse sexism remains a mirage. However, I have to admit that the meaninglessness and impossibility of their version of emancipation must be related to their desperation for change.

In one of their conversations, Pat goes as far as calling this imagined world the "New South Africa" (33). This is significant because it suggests that the new South Africa, South Africa after apartheid, still comes short in its treatment of women. The attainment of democracy and emancipation of women are not synonymous in Pat's view. Therefore, they look forward to the "future" where matriarchy, not patriarchy, will reign. This idea of reversed gender roles is especially interesting because of its alignment with the views of separatist feminist, Valerie Solanas. In her essay, Solanas recommends that to have a world free of the oppression of women, gender roles must be changed. Solanas makes the radical claim that "the male should be of use to the female, wait on her, cater for her slightest whim, obey her every command, be totally subservient to her, exist in perfect obedience to her will" (1978:16). The spectacle of Bra Willie, Dee's boyfriend, polishing the floor on his knees with a child strapped on his back, hastily serving her hot tea and rushing fearfully to the kitchen to add more sugar when she complains, insulting him for getting pregnant again and sending him home suggests a very similar idea. While dishing out terror and authority upon him, Sis Dee assumes the authoritative role that he has always assumed. This means that the same method of sexist discrimination that has always been directed at women is now being used on men.

As one of the first issues presented in the play, the ideas of 'reverse sexism' and gender role reversal are brought in to address social gender prejudices, suggesting a kind of gender utopia. According to Croatian scholar, Darko Suvin, Utopianism is "the verbal construction of a particular quasi-human community where socio political institutions, norms and individual relationships are organized according to a more perfect principle than in the author's community, this construction being based on estrangement arising out of an alternative historical hypothesis" (1973:132).

Suvin's arguments are relevant to the spectacle of role reversal as dramatized in the play. The fact that utopianism is nothing but the "verbal construction of a quasi-human community" suggests that the reversed world these women seek is nothing but an uttered wish which cannot truly exist in a human world. Lyman Tower Sargent's definition of utopianism as "social dreaming" (1994:3) reinforces this point. These characters' desires for such a "New South Africa" suggest that that are engaged in fantasy. Dee's harsh response to Pat's imagination: "Dream on" (33) perfectly coincides with Sargent's definition of utopianism as dreaming.

The play continues to explore the prospect of role reversal to highlight women's liberation through the characterization of the male characters. Although mentioned in the play, the male characters are not seen. It is clear from the women's descriptions of these men that they are regarded as poor, promiscuous and irresponsible. Bra Willie is economically dependent on Dee. Even though a partner-in-crime with drug dealer Thandi, Bra Willie's irresponsibility makes him lavish his money and he later attempts to exploit Sis Dee as he uses her car to impress other women. He also borrows Dee's car but does not return it. As she waits for her car in a terrible rage, she presents Bra Willie's financial prospects in a dialogue with Thandi:

> Thandi: Willie is not here?
>
> Dee**:** Don't talk to me about him, if my car is not back by tomorrow, I'm going to the police.
>
> Dee: Tomorrow, I'm throwing all his clothes out on the street, whoever wants them can have them, they can have a jumble sale.
>
> Thandi**:** Polo, Pierre Cardin, Yves Saint Laurent … yhoo Big Dee! I can imagine him running around in his underpants … I can also see war on the street … people fighting over Willie's clothes … in fact, that's a scene I wouldn't miss seeing.
>
> Dee**:** In fact if you want them you can have them. You can start a flea market at the gate, you'll make a fortune. I know how much I paid for those clothes. (30)

This expository dialogue opens up how massively dependent Bra Willie is on Dee for his welfare, so much so that she can decide to cut him off anytime she pleases. Further evidence of Bra Willie's subservience is his return of her car. He sneaks into the compound to park the car and disappears immediately, a gesture that suggests he is afraid of Sis Dee.

Continuing this trope of man's uselessness portrayed in the play, Thandi's brother is presented as poor, homeless, and reliant on support from his sister. Expressing her disgust at the way her brother manages her house and his total dependence on her, she engages Dee in a dialogue:

> Thandi: Dee, do you know that on top of everything, my brother has moved back into the house? As if that is not enough, his friends have moved back in with him.
>
> Dee**:** Did his girlfriend kick him out?
>
> Thandi**:** Yes!
>
> Dee: So? Do the same. Say good riddance to rubbish.
>
> Thandi**:** You know how much I have spent renovating that house. … I have just had a big fight with him. I told him, "that food you're eating, that bed you're sleeping on, the blankets you sleep under and that couch your friends spill booze on are mine. I paid for them."
>
> Dee**:** And what did he say?
>
> Thandi**:** Fuck off. (31)

The excerpt firstly introduces Thandi's brother as dependent on her before also taking on Thandi's brother's friends as financially incompetent and female-dependent. The fact that Thandi's brothers' friends also live in the house she pays for, eat her food and use her household materials extends the point of the failure of men which is consistently addressed in the play. Again, his girlfriend is revealed as more financially buoyant because she had been accommodating him until she decides to kick him out. Just like Bra Willie and other men in the play, he is depicted as parasitical. Importantly, the play suggests that women can live without men and that, in most situations when women are breadwinners, conventional gender roles seem naturally to change. The financial superiority that the play assigns to women parallels their gender superiority. In this way, *So What's New*? also seems to play into the patriarchal stereotype that men can only be regarded as men if they are financially superior to their spouses – Sis Dee and Bra Willie's relationship seems to exemplify this point.

Continuing this theme of male (ir)relevance in the play, these women contemplate or debate the importance of men in their lives. One of these instances come up when violence, men's means of exacting masculinity, is presented in the play. After watching the soap opera on this very night, sounds of gunshots, destruction and the burning of property are heard outside Sis Dee's house. As a result of fear Dee, who at this time has broken up with Willie, declares that she "need[s] a man in the house". Thandi, a character who consistently maintains her desire to stay single, counters

Dee's remarks: "No. You need a gun. It's more reliable" (44). This brute disavowal of men aligns with Solana's call for the "replacement of men by machines" (1978:16). One interesting point from Thandi's comment here is the suggestion of the equation between a man and a gun, suggesting that men and guns do the same job. However, Thandi's reason for calling for a gun rather than a man can also been seen from the standpoint of reliability. Machines such as guns in this context will not cheat on women, abuse, rape, exploit or suppress them as the men in their lives are suggested to be doing. This scene of violence and other similar scenes in the play are important because they portray how men tend to announce and perpetuate their masculinity: they egoistically exploit women's need for protection. The fact that Dee utters that she needs a man in the house for protection from the violence caused by the same men alludes to men's use of violence to exact their authority. In fact, Solanas rightly avows that men create "gratuitous violence" (11): they construct "a highly artificial society enabling [them] to appropriate the appearance of worth through money, prestige, 'high' social class, degrees and professional position and knowledge" (1978:7) in order to get attention from women. In other words, men create gods and cajole women to worship these gods. However, despite the patriarchal spacen which these women find themselves, the play generally presents them as emotionally and financially self-sufficient.

Dike explains her vision for the play in her interview with Perkins. She wants "the audience to understand that black women are funky! "Can be brave. [They can] get together … get down [and] have fun" (25). Miki Flockemann also describes the women in the play: Sis Dee, Pat and Thandi as "upwardly mobile" (1998:221) to suggest something of the ideals of feminist theatre – aiming at empowering and affirming women's strength through theatrical depictions. All through the play, we see how free-spirited and independent the women are, a point which Thurman also alludes to. While the play lives up to Dike's vision, it does so by including many other facets, not only those of pleasure and bravery but also of the patriarchal or social dictates that women still have to juggle with despite their independence. In this way, the play acknowledges some of the gaps or ambiguities in these women's lives. At a moment in the play when they are grooving, drinking, singing and having fun, Thandi's words breaks the good mood and portray a condition of frustration, unhappiness and deficiency in their lives:

> Thandi: Hey girls, here we are, black. Single. Successful. Our love lives are up to shit. The only men in our lives are either married, hangers-on or just pure scum. What is wrong with us?

> Pat**:** Men don't like women who own houses, drive their own cars, have their own bank books, open doors for themselves. They scare the shit off their pants. (42)

Thandi's description of herself as "black, single and successful" accords with the playwright's aims for the play. However, she seems to consent that they need men in their lives but only those who are successful and responsible. In fact, she puts the blame of not having men in their lives on the women themselves by asking the rhetorical question, 'What is wrong with us?' This is contrary to the positions of Western feminists such as de Beauvoir, Freidan and others who condemn the ways in which women are defined in relation to men. The latter part of the above quote which speaks to men's inability to cope with successful women is also seen in Mtshali's play *Weemen*. As a way of countering Thandi's point, Pat takes away the blame from the women by claiming that it is men who are put off by their apparent success and independence.

Dike's choice of the word "scum" to describe these irresponsible men is worth noting as it corresponds directly with the title of Valerie Solanas' radical feminist paper, *The SCUM Manifesto*. In this essay, the author drives home her extremist concept of gender discrimination and patriarchy by calling for the absolute banishment of men either by forcibly taking over government and other institutions which are largely controlled by men or by simply refusing to work for the government so that government activities can be crippled or completely eliminated. As such, Dike's play can be interpreted in the light of Solanas's call albeit in a subtler form.

As argued above, the reactions to male chauvinism and resistance to male domination in the play suggest that it could be interpreted, in part, along the theoretical lines of radical feminism. Furthermore, thematic elements relating to gender such as reverse sexism, the ridicule of men, an imagined separatist universe and the financial and romantic empowerment of the women over men are suggestive of this inclination. In this way, the play represents an important departure from Yerima's gender concerns as explored earlier. In his attempt to address gender inequality, Yerima sees the historical role of tradition and culture as fundamental elements that not only maintain women's oppression, but also seen as the origins in most cases of the oppression of women. Rather than employing a radical approach to patriarchy, his plays align with African womanism and nego-feminism which offer a more collaborative rather than confrontational model of gender relations.

Weemen: Understanding Masculinity, Resistance and Subversion as route towards Freedom

Weemen premiered in 1996 at the Grahamstown Festival in the Eastern Cape and was directed by the playwright himself, Thulani Mtshali. As far as I have been able to establish, there is no published records of any further performances of the play. However, Flockemann points out that "Mtshali's *Weemen* (1998) had long runs, touring widely through township areas and involving the audience in debating issues such as African customary law and domestic violence against women" (2002:236). I assume that Flockemann's observations about the performance of *Weemen* can be applied to other plays in the anthology and that these plays may also have been performed in different townships as a form of popular theatre during the period when they were written, as stated earlier, it has been difficult to find records of these performances. *Weemen* is set in an unnamed township in the immediate period after the first democratic election in South Africa. Its dramatic technique is quite straightforward as the play does not adopt a complex plot structure. All the events of the twelve short scenes take place over four days with all the action taking place at the home of the couple, Tsoarelo and Mlitshe, in the street, in Mlitshe's former workplace and in the home of a *sangoma*. The use of language is also simple and direct rather than proverbial or figurative as in the case of Yerima's and Naidoo's plays. In fact, compared to all other plays examined in this study, *Weemen* has the simplest of language; it is also the shortest of them all. The simplicity of this text makes it easy to approach in terms of reading and analysis. Unlike *So What's New?* and *Flight from the Mahabarath*, as I go on to demonstrate, *Weemen* does not speak to or engage with any narrative outside the storyline itself; rather, it presents a single, non-digressive plot sequence. In terms of the critical study of the text, there is very little scholarly work on which to draw. The one exception is the work of critic, Olga Barrios. There is a paucity of critical literature on the play – one which addresses gender-based violence, one of the most salient social problem of the current South African society – makes this study more important. Gender-based violence is a menace in the country as it continues to increase at an alarming rate.

In this section, gender-based violence and masculinity as gender concerns are important to the discussion of how the play negotiates gender, oppression, women's resistance and patriarchy. I begin with a paper published online by the international organisation, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children whose aim is to "improve the lives and defend the rights of refugee and internally displaced women, children and adolescents" (2005: i). According to this

organisation, "gender-based violence is a form of violence that is directed against a person on the basis of gender or sex. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty" (2005:2). Another scholar, British sociologist and author, Jeff Hearn observes that, "violence is understood as a major, perhaps, even the prime, form of power" (1998: vii). Hearn's observation suggests that men seem to equate power, hegemony and superiority with violence. According to a report conducted by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation on the role of violence in gender-based violence in South Africa, "rigid gender norms encourage men to equate the use of violence with manhood" (2016:12). South African women are victims of different forms of abuse. According to Binaifer Nowrojee, South African women "are victims of widespread violence that prevents them from enjoying human rights …[O]ne in every six South African women is in an abusive relationship" (1995:2). According to UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre, domestic violence is "the most prevalent yet relatively hidden and ignored form of violence against women and girls" (2000:2).

The descriptions of violence and the contextualization of this menace in South Africa helps to foreground the relevance of the 1996 play even over two decades after it was written. In this context, too, it is little wonder that many texts published after apartheid South Africa such as *Tshepang: The Third Testament* (2004) by Lara Foot which was inspired by the rape of a nine-month old child in 2001 and *Relativity: Township Stories* (2006) by Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom & Presley Chweneyagae explore this concern. Also striking is the attention given to the subject of gender violence and rape in South Africa by scholars such as Lucy Valerie Graham (2003), Meg Samuelson (2006) and Pumla Gqola (2015). Writing about post-transitional theatre or what I prefer to call post-1994 theatre in South Africa, Barrios observes that the "two main issues that are repeated in contemporary black theatre plays are: male abuse and violence against women and the discrimination that affects those people of hybrid identities (coloureds)" (2012: 39). *Weemen* is a play that succinctly yet earnestly addresses these concerns.

The play opens at night at the couple's house, which is described as "a shack made of zinc, one room which is kitchen cum bedroom" (104). This depicts their economic status and foreshadows the doubled nature of trauma that Tsoarelo will go through: domestic abuse and economic hardship. In this opening scene, she is described as sitting down and "panicking in her nightdress. [She] paces up and down from the bedside to the cooking space" (104). This apprehensive

disposition tells of her frightened mood as she believes her husband, Mlitshe, will come in anytime to resume the abuse he routinely subjects her to. Immediately, Mlitshe begins banging aggressively on the door, ordering the woman to "bring the bloody plate" (104) of food. The next scene sees Mlitshe refusing to get up from bed to go to work due to hangover. When he finally gets up from bed to go to work, it is late in the morning and he still staggers from his hangover. On getting to work, Mlitshe is fired by his white woman boss, Mrs. Johnson.

Seeing that his source of financial income has been cut, Mlitshe consults a *sangoma* (traditional spiritualist) to help him with getting a job and to prevent him from losing his wife since he believes that his economic power is the reason she still lives with him. The next two scenes see him claiming to be holy and attending church services as a way of addressing his financial problems. Despite his spiritual efforts, Mlitshe does not get a job. This frustration returns him to his bullying and abusive state. On a subsequent day, after his wife leaves the house to hawk her goods, Mlitshe returns home drunk and frustrated. He finds his wife's money at home, takes it and goes to lavish it on drink. The return of Tsoarelo sees her beat her husband, now drunk, until he surrenders to both her physical and financial superiority.

In the passionate monologue which opens the play, Tsoarelo asks:

> But why? … Am I doing something wrong? … What? … Nothing! It is not because he drinks too much, otherwise he would be fighting other men as well! But just because I am a woman and I am his wife. … But why is it that most women suffer one way or another? (107)

This speech opens up many facets of patriarchy, namely that society has condemned many women to victimhood status without reason; that women's lives are marked by suffering and that men would rather exact their power and manliness on women than their fellow men. Tsoarelo's observations suggest that men consider their fellow men as competitors or challengers while women are seen as objects or prey. Tsoarelo's questions and observations will usher in the exegesis of the play. Subsequent scenes continue to show various oppressive and violent interchanges. When Mlitshe discovers that his wife has been running a small-scale business in her house, he threatens to take over her income. This is one of many examples when Mlitshe forces his power on his wife. At intervals, out of frustration, Tsoarelo displays different forms of resistance such as shouting back at her husband or threatening to kill him with the axe with which he attempts to cut

her. However, until the last scene when she confronts him with violence, Tsoarelo continues to endure the abuse.

Toxic Masculinity: "Yes, guys are right, if you don't beat up a woman, she takes you for granted, she takes you cheap"

The play introduces the idea of murder as the most extreme form of subversion. In many female-oriented texts, the murder of a male oppressor can be understood as a metaphor for the demise of women's oppression itself. As Barrios suggests, "killing the oppressor is actually a literary metaphor employed by many women writers as symbol of liberation for women from their burden of pain and the abuse they receive in real life" (2012:42-43). However, in many African texts such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and Sade Adeniran's *Imagine This* (2007), the murder can also take literal form. A similar set-up is hinted at in *Weemen*. After having the thought of murdering her husband but being unable to execute it due to the fact that he is the father of her children, Tsoarelo takes the drastic step of beating him when she finds out he is drunk and weak – a move which finally accords her the liberty she deserves. In the last couple of scenes, Mlitshe (who has lost his job) succumbs to the authority of his wife and finally begs to be her employee. The play ends by reiterating the subjects of gender role reversal and women's financial victory which, as I go on to discuss, eventually accords her control and supremacy. The man agrees to run errands and serve his wife because of his financial weakness. Violence, masculinity, femininity and men's insecurity and other gender concerns, all nurtured by culture, will be explored as I proceed with my analysis of *Weemen*.

Even though the extreme reaction to gender-based violence which is the murder of the partner does not feature in this play, all sorts of violent actions that could potentially lead to the killing of a partner are clearly portrayed. According to American writers, Jeremy Earp and Jackson Katz who have written extensively on violent masculinity, "the root of the problem [of violent masculinity] lies not just in these few places, but everywhere, deeply embedded in what passes for normal culture – part of the normal training, conditioning and socializing of boys and men" (1999:22). What these scholars opine is that male violence can be caused by the way boy children and men are nurtured and not because it is in their nature. De Beauvoir (1949), Connell (2005) and Ngozie

Adichie in her pamphlet *Dear Ijeawele* (2017) also confirm Erap and Katz's observation. According to American authors Susan Schechter and Jeffrey Edelson, domestic violence is a "pattern of assaultive and/or coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners" (1999:122-123). Some aspects of these theories are pertinent to the ideas of the play.

Mlitshe's presence in the house unleashes terror and anxiety in Tsoarelo. His continuous shouting and banging on the door indicates his violent nature. After he discovers that his wife has a small home business, Mlitshe says: "Yes, guys are right, if you don't beat up a woman, she takes you for granted, she takes you cheap … It's worse when she starts having money and you earn nothing … A man is a man, is a man, is a man, is a man" (110). This comment seems to corroborate Earp and Katz's initial observation about violence and authority. The phrase "guys are right" suggests that Mlitshe's violent and masculine behaviour is supported by the broader cultural matrix; in this way, "guys" – which is a synecdoche for patriarchal masculinity/society – are supposed to exact dominance over women through violence. Going further, Mlitshe vehemently posits that a man is one whose wife is subdued under him, someone who controls his household by fear. This brings to mind the characters Okwonko in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and Babamukuru in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988): they are presented as model figures of masculinity from the traditional African perspective, men who have total control over their households through the agent of violence. Mlitshe's continuous use of the axiom "a man is man" suggests that to him and the society more generally, a man is one who fulfills the conditions of violent masculinity. And as such, he credits himself as a man because of his ability to instill fear and terror in his wife. Of further interest here is Holly Johnson's argument that "masculinity is acted out through … attacks and degradation of female partners" (2000:725). Mlitshe's constant attack of his wife, his persistent insults, his taking of her money and his burning of her dress assert the idea of masculinity elucidated by Johnson.

Also noteworthy in the play's depiction of toxic masculinity is Mlitshe's repeated use of the word "control" which, in the context of this short play, serves to push home the man's passion and desperation for control, power and authority. The adherence to the traditional definition and demands of masculinity – or 'being a man' – which negatively affects everyone in the society including male and female is presented as toxic in the play. According to Terry Kupers, toxic

masculinity is "constructed of those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that foster domination of others and are, thus, socially destructive". The term delineates acts such as "misogyny, greed, and violent domination" (2005:716-717). Mlitshe's consistent display of misogyny and violence synchronises with Kupers' observation. However, he takes this further by displaying greed for his wife's money which he vows to control.

Solanas' views on threatened masculinity are also helpful here. According to her, "having an obsessive desire to be admired by women, but no intrinsic worth, the male constructs a highly artificial society enabling him to appropriate the appearance of worth through money …" (7). In the men's world, the man has to be in possession of financial power, and when he cannot get hold of this, his manhood becomes endangered. Mlitshe makes this clear at the end of the play when he succumbs to the authority of his wife. He says: "the Gospel truth is that I feel like all other men … So powerless with less money than you made" (112). Mlitshe declares that for most men, financial weakness is tantamount to powerlessness. On this basis, it is right to point out how the play ascribes manhood and masculinity to financial power. One can argue that this is the historical reason why (until recently) men have always been paid better than women at work places and why the idea of housewives is mostly preached by men. Mlitshe's confession is similar to what de Beauvoir observes when she says that "a man is sometimes angered when he feels he has lost" (1949:698). Men's frustration is often taken out on their partners and sometimes their children. Such is the case with Mlitshe: having discovered her economic dominance, he selfishly devises methods of putting stumbling blocks in her way.

Still dwelling on his loss of power and the need for control of his wife's income, he uses the word 'control' two more times. He says: "you make a lot of money to maintain this family. All I would do is to control what comes in and out …" (110). The third and last time he mentions this also happens in the same scene. This is when he thinks his fears of becoming powerless are becoming reality right in front of him: "You see once women starts having control of money, they want to control we men as well. Never, over my dead body!" (110). This time, his wife is getting fed up with his chauvinism and misogyny, she challenges his authority and is even ready to engage him in a physical duel. The continuous repetition of the word "control" suggests that Mlitshe wants to gain financial hegemony over his wife irrespective of who is making the money. Interestingly, at the end of the play, the control, power and authority that Mlitshe is so desperate for are consciously

transferred to Tsoarelo while subservience and domestic labour is passed to him. He confesses that: "from today … I want to work for you…. I will go and buy stock for you, clean sell… I will work under you". Tsoarelo immediately begins to give him orders: "You must pack everything properly and set up the stock for my customers" (112). This short conversation shows how their roles have been reversed. As in *So What's New?* gender reversal is used to resolve the narrative of power struggle.

Another question relating to the play's representation of hegemonic masculinity is the criticism of the heroic representation of men. In the closing scene of the play just before he surrenders to his wife's supremacy, he presents himself as the heroic figure while simultaneously presenting his wife as almost useless. Coming back home in his now consistent state of drunkenness, he bangs on the door again and this time: "Open, Vula! The boss is back! He is a hero" (111). Mlitshe's narcissistic glorification of himself as the boss and hero relegates his wife to the position of being a servant and the conquered. If "heroism consists of actions undertaken to help others, despite the possibility that they may result in the helper's death or injury" (Becker & Eagly, 2004:163), then Mlitshe's heroic claim has to be questioned. It is quite interesting to see how a man who lacks all the conventional features of social heroism such as bravery, helping others and taking risks still finds a way of classifying himself as a hero. Mlitshe does not fulfill the cannons of social heroism, but in his own immediate domestic environment which he has subdued, he sees himself as a hero. What the play suggests, by contrast is that Mlitshe is the antithesis of the heroic. For example, his continuous manhandling of his wife leads her to question not only the institution of marriage but also her status in the house: she is beaten, shouted at and made to feel worthless in her home. Mlitshe also frequently compares his wife to a furniture: "you, you are just like the furniture! Bloody damn shit" (104), thus establishing the state of valuelessness he ascribes to her.

As the above examples suggest, Tsoarelo's position in the house is one of servitude and oppression, thus opening up an important exploration of the institution of marriage. As Tsoarelo says, "besides that I am married to Mlitshe, what is it that I get from him? Constant abuse … harassment, insults and beatings" (107). Earlier in the play, she regrets that "if [she] knew getting married was like this, [she] would not have dared even to consider it" (105). With the physical violence that is meted out to her, Tsoarelo undergoes emotional agony as well. Given the list of hostile actions mentioned above it is clear that, from her perspective, nothing beneficial is derived from being married to

him. Tsoarelo's experience seems to be similar to the view of radical feminist leader, Sheila Cronan about marriage. Marriage she avows, "constitutes slavery for women … [and] freedom for women "cannot be won without the abolition of marriage" (1973:219). According to Marlene Dixon, who was a member of the Democratic Workers Party in the United States of America, marriage "is the chief vehicle for the perpetuation of the oppression of women; it is through the role of wife that the subjugation of women is maintained". Other feminists who oppose the marriage institution in their writings are Shulamith Firestone (1970), Jessie Bernard (1972) and Marilyn French (1977). As similar critique of marriage is presented in *Weemen*. For Tsoarelo, marriage grants nothing positive but rather is the chief vehicle for the perpetration of her abuse.

The analysis of the play would be imcomplte if I failed to addresse the way race is associated with gender oppression. The other female character who appears in the play is Mrs. Johnson, described as a white woman. Despite his constant abuse of his wife at home, Mlitshe never considers exacting his masculine authority over his employer Mrs. Johnson, despite her status as a woman. The questions this bring out are: is gender violence on the part of Africans only directed internally to fellow black people? Is it easier to perpetuate gender violence or any form of violence against a black man? it must be stated clearly however that, beyond the scope of the present study, these questions raised by the play suggest something of the complex dynamics of race and gender in the South African context.

Subversion as Resistance

Tsoarelo reaches a point of anger and decides to take a desperate action against her husband when she discovers that her clothes had been burnt her hard-earned money spent by her husband. Mltishe returns home at 2 am after squandering the money and commands her to make food for him as she usually does. However, as he pulls the blanket from her body, he is met with a new Tsoarole who has taken on a subversive countenance. She adopts a feminist radical move which Sandra Nwokocha argues "acknowledges rather than denounces subversion" (2017:3): she beats him and sends him out into the cold where he stays and begs for forgiveness. The confrontational approach taken by Tsoarole is what Solanas, Dworkin, and many radical feminists call for as a measure against patriarchy. In her novel *Mercy* (1991), Dworkin uses a female character to declare that she

wants to see a man beaten to a bloody pulp with a high-heel shoe shoved in his mouth, like an apple in the mouth of a pig. Tsoarelo's ultimate resistance and subversive action is similar to that which is taken by the character, Beatrice, in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. What both of these texts suggest is that these oppressed female characters have to rebel to get their freedom. A parallel might be made to Simone de Beauvoir who articulates that "for [women], there is no other way out than to work for [their] liberation" (1949:664) but to take conscious active measures. Beauvoir's argument is similar to Lois McNay's more general claim: "repression produces its own resistances" (1994:39). For Tsoarelo, the "work" and "resistance" she does is to engage her husband through physical combat which the play presents as the only way out of oppression. Although Tsoarelo does not murder her husband like Beatrice does, she nevertheless overthrows him as Solanas has asked.

The play ends with Mlitshe's submission, remorse and sobriety which, the play suggests, are important in the quest for gender equality. The culprit must acknowledge his oppressive status, be remorseful about it and then take necessary steps toward turning back from it. Writing about the play, Barrios claims that forgiveness from women – just as Tsoarelo has done with Mlitshe – is necessary in order for men who have been oppressed mentally and physically through apartheid to be able to change:

> The author wants to create some space for men's reflection and transformation. Only by creating an adequate space in that process of change to acknowledge past traumas and heal the pain they had been subjected to during apartheid, will South Africans be able to eradicate violence in general and violence against women in particular". (2012:43)

Barrios' interpretation of the play's significance rests on the assumption that 'reflection' and 'transformation' are the inevitable results of immediate remorse, something that the history of male violence would seem to contradict. If the society as represented through the play finds it hard to give positive responses to the questions above, then women's obedience and subservience has to be substituted by subversion and radical actions. Also, for Barrios, the past oppression of South African men through apartheid needs to be acknowledged and the need for healing be permitted in order to facilitate the eradication not only of violence against women, but any other form of violence, including what I termed intra-personal mental violence of individual black male against himself. The now remorseful Militshe says: "from now on, if you forgive me for the last time, I will prove to you that I have changed ... I want to work for you" (112). However, we must

recognize that Mlitshe's submission, remorse and change of heart do not come without the woman's physical and economic efforts to liberate herself. This means that women's conscious effort for independence will not only liberate them from gender oppression but will also help men to realise their abusive nature and turn from it.

Throughout the play until the last scene, the woman is presented as subservient, obedient, objectified and tolerant while the man is characterized as violent, dominant, controlling and irresponsible. But by the end of the play, the woman becomes the lord and controller because of her financial prowess, assertiveness and subversive response. The fact that Tsoarelo still supports her husband when she becomes the breadwinner suggests that women are passionate enough to support their abusive men through rehabilitation and in the men's quest to be better humans. This idea is also noted by American writer Lena Slachmuijlder, who observes that, although "*Weemen* highlight[s] domestic abuse, [its] ending … showed a victim empowered enough to support the abuser through his process of rehabilitation" (1999:18). Despite her abuse and mistreatment at the hands of her husband, she is considerate enough to forgive and see him through his period of recuperation.

The previous point proves that the play promotes women's strength, determination and economic independence, a position which finally sets Tsoarelo free at the end of the narrative. Earlier in the play, when a customer comes to buy a product from her, Tsoarelo says, "so, you thought I am stuck and dependent on him? Sorry, I have my own secret, small and private business – otherwise my children would starve …. But he must not know, and will never know, he is hardly here, or else he can skin me alive… He is fully content with me depending on him" (105). What is suggested in this monologue is that women, especially housewives, can also protect themselves by engaging in activities that will bring them financial freedom. This is because, as observed earlier, men seem to devise financial supremacy as another form of propagating gender hegemony. Reviewing the play, Loren Kruger similarly observes that the play is about "a woman abused by her husband, who manages to secure economic and personal independence" (2000:299). That Tsoarelo's route to freedom comes through economic buoyancy corroborates de Beauvoir's declaration that "once a woman ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator" (1949:689). The links between gender oppression – which takes the form of a 'superior' being

forcefully enacting authority or superiority on another – and colonialism are worth noting here as they both consist of one denominator: oppression. Appropriate here is Franz Fanon's vivacious comment that colonization is an act of oppression that requires action: "decolonization cannot be achieved by the wave of magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentleman's agreement" (1963:2). Rather, he argues, it has to be challenged. Likewise, the play suggests, women's emancipation needs similar forms of challenge. The bold submissions of writers such as de Beauvoir and Fanon, confirm the reason why Mlitshe's fear of a loss of economic power forces him to attempt to take control of his wife's income.

Not only does the play emphasizes how and why men encourage women's dependence on them by making them full housewives, it also speaks to the insecurities of these men. The fear of their wives being seen and attracted to other men at their workplaces also encourages the isolation men put their wives through. As Mlitshe's says: "No wife of mine is going to work, because one: I support you, two: next time you will be having a lot of friends and many lunch boyfriends" (105-106). Here we see that his wife's economic status is dictated and determined by him. The comment proves that men's actions and words arise from a narcissistic and androcentric standpoint. Mlitshe's treatment of his wife is a clear example of Solana's observation who fervently claims that "desperately insecure, fearing that his woman will leave him if she is exposed to other men or to anything remotely resembling life, the male seeks to isolate her from other men and from little civilization there is" (1978:5). The play tries to engage this form of dominance as being selfish and egocentric and ultimately calls for radical measure on the part of oppressed women.

All through the play, Mlitshe's misogyny stems from his desire to validate his masculinity to his wife. This yearning clearly aligns with Dworkin's radicalist statement: "the annihilation of a woman's personality, individuality, will, character, is prerequisite to male sexuality" (1979:14). It also buttresses Solanas' more outrageous claim that "to be sure he is a 'man', the male must see to it that the female be clearly a 'woman', the opposite of a man that is, the female must act like a faggot" (6). For men then to be complete and authoritative, the play suggests that they have to enforce the role of femininity on the part of women, thereby asserting roles and maintaining the gender binary.

What is also evident is that different measures continue to be taken to deal with gender oppression as this continues to affect equality and growth of individuals, families and societies at large.

Different sections of scholars, activist and 'artivists' have made various moves to curb gender oppression and to create gender-equal spaces for all. Among these steps are the ones taken by international human right organisations such as UNICEF, UNESCO and AU. For instance, UNICEF has been working on a strategic programme known as GAP (Gender Action Plan) which aims to foster gender equality for the next decade. Also, on their website, African Union (AU) declares that it has been working with different "African governments to encourage women's full and productive employment, to recognize the importance of unpaid care and domestic work, and to ensure women can access and control their own economic and financial resources". For UNESCO, they state on their website that "women and men must enjoy equal opportunities, choices, capabilities, power and knowledge as equal citizens". As the discussion above suggests, both literary and non-literary authors have also added their voices to the drive for gender equality. Among the latter set are the radical feminists mentioned above. For their part, Earp and Katz recommends that,

> if we want to deal seriously with reducing [gender based] violence, we have to turn away from thinking about violence as "kids imitating violence," and focus instead on the incredible diversity of ways that we as a society are actively constructing violent masculinity as a cultural norm; not as something unusual or unexpected, but as one of the ways that boys become men (22).

Erap and Katz' recommendation is however not deemed fit for radical feminists such as Dworkin, Solanas, Mary Daly and Marilyn French. These feminists proffer a more drastic approach to eradicating patriarchy. They call for the toppling of men and the possibility of their complete eradication as they are the ones who create, propagate and practice patriarchy.

As noted earlier, there are moments in the play that bear a strong resemblance to Solanas' desperate call for male banishment. In several moments of frustration, Tsoarelo contemplates cutting her husband with the same axe with which he cuts her, but she always retreats from this action. In the first instance, immediately after Mlitshe's first attack on her when he takes up an axe to chop her, the stage instructions indicate that "on realizing that he is asleep, she slowly takes the axe into her hands, looks at him snoring … but she cannot do it … she breaks down into tears" (105). In this radical step, the playwright could have made Tsoarelo chop him into pieces, but Tsoarelo holds back from violence, rather, she overcomes him through a lesser form of confrontation. In another instance, she contemplates either leaving the house or committing suicide: "Maybe I should just

kill myself! … Oh no! What will happen to my children? … But this? … Yes … why not … Kill the bastard once and for all and live in peace!" (107). And in her last subversive move, she makes it clear to him that she could have poisoned his food or chopped him with his axe if she wanted to, every time he is drunk and powerless. The play finishes by conceding power to the woman: Mlitshe waits on her, caters for her slightest whim, obeys her every command, is totally subservient and obedient to her. Again, this portrait of male subservience bears some affinities with Solanas' radical views and affiliations.

To conclude, this play is concerned with representing the forms of gender-based violence that are prevalent in the immediate post-1994 period in South Africa. Tsoarelo's resistance and subversive reaction suggests that rather than being passive and tolerant of domestic violence, women should be pro-active. Economic independence for women is seen as an important step at not only overcoming gender-based abuse, but something that can prevent it in the first place. The play shows how being economically healthy can potentially shield a woman from domestic gender violence. Lastly, from the study and analysis of this play, it is clear from Mlitshe's last statement that violence, masculine roles and societal demands in terms of economic and social statuses, create and nurture men's oppressive behavioural patterns. To continue the exploration of patriarchy in this study, I look at the last of this set of plays analysed in this chapter, namely *Flight from the Mahabarath.* And like the previous play in this chapter, I argue that, in most part, the play substantiates the ideals of western radical feminism rather than African womanism which Ahmed Yerima's plays project.

Patriarchy, Resistance and Sexuality in Muthal Naidoo's *Flight from the Mahabarath*

Aristotle's questionable account of male and female gender/sex dichotomy in his text, *Politics*, sees the female as naturally weak not only physically but also mentally and men naturally stronger. Aristotle observed that "as regards the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject" (cited in Smith, 1983:467). Although criticized by many, the traces of Aristotle's ideological system are still visible in many cultures today and are adequately represented in literary works. In the tradition of the 'epic', a term used to imply tradition, the past and patriarchy in the play, women and men tend to be categorized in Aristotle's

fashion. However, the play dispels these beliefs in various ways. As I continue with the exploration of literary negotiations of gender and gender oppression in selected examples of contemporary South African drama, this section explores how tradition or social convention creates and facilitates gender prejudice in different ways. In *So What's New?* we see a form of women's resistance where although the women remain in the world which discriminates against them, they nevertheless resist social femininity and defined gender roles through their intransigence and self-independence. In *Flight from the Mahabarath*, by contrast, rather than remaining in the patriarchal world where they were born and nurtured, women are shown to remove themselves from this tradition to create a world of their own.

As in *So What's New?* the idea of utopianism is an important aspect of the play's treatment of resistance of gender oppression. The world the women in *Flight from the Mahabarath* create for themselves is given different appellations, all connoting liberty and independence. This new women-centered regime is called names such as "new world", "our space" and "our world" and represents an imagined post-gender world or what Hogle calls "post-patriarchy" (1988:99). Its presence in the play represents a clear antagonism against the old ways of patriarchy; this is registered in the different remarks made against it by various women during the course of the play. The epic to which the play refers – ancient Indian script *Mahabharata* – can be understood as a metaphor for patriarchy, traditional conservatism and social conventionality. As a matter of observation, although the term epic is used in the play to represent the past, patriarchy and culture, it is a literary form in its own right. In poetry for instance, it is a composition that celebrates the achievements of heroes in often elevated style. As suggested above, however, one could also understand this term as a synecdoche for both patriarchy and gender inequality; it is the dramatic space where men are treated as heroes. The women's escape from this epic space gives the play a strong feminist perspective.

In this section, I argue that the play draws on some of the ideals of radical feminism and explores gender-based issues such as masculinity, femininity, sexuality and motherhood. The essence of radical feminism in contrast to a more adaptive or collaborative feminism (as portrayed in plays in the previous chapters) is that radical feminism takes the initiative to fight for freedom rather than waiting for it to be 'negotiated' or given. We see instances of radical feminist thinking in the women's practical relocation from the poisoned patriarchal world of the epic to the new world

which can be seen as a form of fighting and taking initiative for liberation, an idea that is also explored in *Weemen*. Writing about women's resistance in *Flight from the Mahabarath*, Neelima V. [sic] observes that "the characters display sites of resistance and set up new structures of authority and political initiatives" (2014:289) through their relocation and the creation of their own space. The steps the women take would also appear to be a clear example of Ogunyemi's argument in an interview with Susan Arndt. Talking about politics and democracy, Ogunyemi, although the pioneer of the subtle, men-incorporating African womanism, expresses a stern radical stand when she asserts that "to [her], the next step to true democracy is to have two houses of representatives – one consisting of only women and one only for men. This would be true democracy and not what is practiced [in Nigeria]" (Ogunyemi in Arndt, 2000:725). Sandra Nwokocha makes a similar point in relation to the articulation of women's resistance in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*: she argues that "regardless of the oppressive agents' intent to constrain the choices available to subjects, the recipients of power possess the tenacity to act in spite of, or in reaction to, the power imposed upon them" (2017:15). As I go on to argue, *Flight from Mahabarath* can also be seen as articulating a form of radical feminist response.

Flight from Mahabarath was also published in the anthology, *Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays* (1998). Unlike others, the date of the first performance of the play is not included in the anthology, neither does any online search of the performance of the play provide any record of its performance. However, the play received international recognition when it had a five-day run at the Theatre and Dance Department of the Appalachian State University (ASU) in the United States of America in April in 2017. The reason for this lack of performance could be associated with the question of race and, arguably, the playwright's gender. In an interview with Perkins, Naidoo complained that "all of [her] plays were flops because people saw the name 'Naidoo' [an Indian name] and thought, 'this must be an Indian play' and were not interested. There are no big followings of Indians" (1998:114). Another reason could be the absence of a strong female dramatic tradition in South Africa especially during the period when the play was written. Watching the performance, the playwright records in an interview that she was thrilled because the performance was a portrayal of her vision which is to bring women out of every form of cultural limitations "and let them be who they want to be, rather than just producing heroes" (114). As she goes on to observe, "the acting performances, interspersed with lively dance sequences, brought to life the characters and the humour of the play" (cited from a Naidoo Muthal

website). A few critical reviews of the play include those by Prathibha (2012); Neelima V. (2014); Richman (2017) published on Muthal's website. In these papers, these authors examine the play from a feminist perspective and criticize some aspects of the traditions and customs of the epic represented in the play. The dearth of academic work on such a play – which addresses gender in such a dynamic and relevant way – is of huge concern. However, this study will serve as one of the very first to critique the play at an academic level of a PhD status.

Flight from the Mahabarath is a partial adaptation of the ancient Indian script *Mahabharata* which was written in *Sanskrit*, a language which according to Damien Keown & Charles Prebish "served as the lingua franca of ancient India, just as Latin did in medieval Europe" (2013:15). I call it partial because this play only addresses the aspect of the ancient script that deals with the representation of womanhood and femininity. The original *Mahabharata* has been revised for different TV and film formats. It has been described as the "world's longest poem … with almost 100, 000 stanzas" (Lochtefeld 2002:399). Some scholars have also compared it to some of the greatest books that have ever been written. William Johnson for instance compares the *Mahabharata* script with the "bible, works of William Shakespeare, the works of Homer, Greek drama, or the Quran" (1998: ix). *Mahabharata* details a dynastic struggle for the throne of Hastinapura between the Kauravas and the Pandavas who are cousins. This struggle results in a great battle which leaves the Pandavas victorious. The story glorifies male heroism, violence and patriarchy while the position of women is narrowed to wives and mothers of heroes: their heroism is based on their domestic and maternal accomplishments and subservience. In an effort to deconstruct the subordinate female position celebrated in *Maharabhata*, Naidoo's version, *Flight from the Mahabarath* (henceforth *Flight*) imagines the possibility of physical escape from the original androcentric epic to a space that allows women to be who they want to be. As such, *Flight* can be classified as one of various recent feminist re-writings of canonical texts. Other texts in this group are Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), a re-writing of Homer's *The Odyssey* (800 BC). In this text, using the character, Penelope, wife of Odysseus, Atwood addresses female otherness, subordination, passivity and victimization by making reference to contemporary concepts of justice and equality. Another related example is Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) which is a feminist and anti-colonial re-writing of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847). These adaptations are textual responses which criticize the positions and representations of womanhood in the original works.

Flight employs the literary technique of telling a story-within-another-story, also known as the frame tale technique. This allows the narrative to designate three different spaces. The first space is that of the epic (as both literary form and traditional patriarchal setting) from whence all of the characters have escaped and to which they always refer. The second space is the space for the application of the re-performance of selected events and experiences of people in the epic. In this space, several women characters and men dramatize the hurtful experiences of the epic (the first space). This is a dramatized analepsis. One after the other, the characters are called to come and tell their story which is represented through re-performance. Five different stories are performed which serves to remind the women of practices and 'norms' that will not be tolerated in the new space. The only two male characters in the play, Brihinnala and Sikandi also tell their separate stories through dramatic re-enactments. To make it clearer, the second space is the performances of the oppressive and abusive experiences of these escapees. The third space created in the play is the new space where they have run to. In this space, the characters condemn the tenets of the first space by creating a new 'universe' which allows them to be who they want to be. It also allows for tolerance and negotiation as the two male characters are allowed into the space despite their gender as male.

My reading of the various demarcations of space and specifically the third space in the play draws on Edward Soja's postcolonial concept of Third Space. He defines it as "an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectices of spatiality–historicality–sociality" (1996:57). In this space, Soja argues that,

> everything comes together… subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history (1996:57).

As the discussion will go on to demonstrate, Soja's notion of the third space provides a useful lens with which to consider the play's attempt to imagine and achieve a non-patriarchal alternative. For clarity, the three spaces, as explored in the play include, the space of memory/recollection, the space of historical re-enactment and the space of the post-epic. The difference between the first and the second spaces lie in the different ways they are represented. While that of the first is

explored through memory and verbal recollection, the second has to do with enactment through performances of selected oppressive events from the epic.

The use of the convoluted plot structure and fluctuating temporal scheme gives the play a distinct dramatic texture. It also means that the narrative does not follow the traditional exposition, rising action, climax and falling action as the conventional play structure requires. Rather, different disjointed stories are told, performed and resolved. This also allows for the play not only to address the problems the woman had experienced in the past, but also to explore the relevance of past experience in the determination of present and, in some cases, future conditions. As the title suggests, the narrative of the play entails a complete flight or escape from the original narrative of the *Mahabharata* epic to a new world – a physical and mental space where they explore freely, are free to be who they want to be, where they can author their lives and where patriarchy is banished. This concept of woman-centered or separated space has been explored by both feminist and non-feminist scholars. In *Flight*, the idea of separated female space can equally be understood as a weapon of emancipation, re-definition and re-starting for women.

Continuing with the exploration of the literary devices used in the play, it is important to note that the play is a complete form of drama as it embodies the concept of 'total theatre'. This means that all elements of theatre such as dance, music, drama, visuals, movements and costuming are incorporated. Also important is Naidoo's adoption of German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's alienation effect techniques. According to her, "the play was inspired by [her] love of Brecht's Epic Theatre" (Naidoo, 2009:4). As suggested in the previous chapter, this technique allows for actors to act in a manner that engages the audiences' desire to take action and not just remain passive about social debates. According to Nigerian theatre scholar, Juliana Omonukpon Omoifo Okoh, this style "promotes a dramatization that will lead to social transformation and towards the liberation of the oppressed classes in particular" (2012:71).

Flight opens straight into the action, presenting the concept of the play without wasting time, employing the *in medias res* literary technique. Women, dressed in traditional Indian dresses, run onto the stage through the auditorium. Draupadi is the first speaker. Although in love with Arjun in the epic, a state she carries along into the new space, she is made to marry Arjuns's four other brothers along with him. As soon as she gets to center stage, she makes a statement about freedom which is soon buttressed by other women. Draupadi shouts, "We did it" which is followed by the

stage direction "there is a joyful outburst. The women laugh and hug one another" (116). The next character to speak is Ganga. She is a character in the epic who was forced to embrace social definitions of womanhood and motherhood. However, she finds herself rejected in the community which pushes her into self-exile in the forest because of her refusal to abide by these norms. As she enters the stage, Ganga shouts: "this is our space" and Radha, a character who stands in support and defense of her friend Hidimba who is accused of witchcraft and almost stoned to death, follows this powerful statement with: "Here I can speak. I have a voice. In the epic, the Mahabharata, I was just a footnote" (116). Other important characters whose different personas help shape the course of the play in different ways include Kunthi, Subadhra, Gandhari, Urvasi and Uttarai. Gandhari is a character who comes to the new space blindfolded – a metaphor for her calculated decision to support her blind husband. Her reason for coming to the new space differs from other women. While other women seek independence and ownership of their lives, Gandhari only joins the space because other women who are either her family member or friends had left the epic and she is left alone. The only two male characters in the play, Brihinnala and Sikandi, detest patriarchy even though they are men and have enjoyed the 'patriarchal dividends' of the epic. However, due to their dissatisfaction with patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity which has been normalized in the epic, these men escape to the new space to find freedom and to be a part of the new world where they can have "a real experience, one [they] are author of" (120).

Exploration of Womanhood/Motherhood in *Flight*

I begin by unpacking the ways in which women, womanhood, motherhood and mothering are defined in the play. I explore these concepts together linked and discussed simultaneously in the play. In other words, the play calls into question the traditional norms of the epic that a woman must be a mother to be seen as a complete woman. *Aetu* critiques the idea that women are men's property, in *Abobaku*, they are trained to grow up and be responsible wives and mothers, to fulfill the tenets of traditional femininity and in *Little Drops*, there is a criticism of women as helpless and at the mercy of men. In the South African play, *At Her Feet*, they are depicted as being bound by patriarchal Islamic customs. In *So What's New?*, they are presented as disillusioned and in *Weemen*, they emerge as subjects upon which masculinity is enacted. *Flight*, I would argue, explores the subject of womanhood as vessels through which heroes are made.: it discloses their

social function as agents who manufacture heroes. As in all the play's discussed in this study, normative definitions of femininity are contested, resisted and re-defined. Despite the negative and subservient positions of womanhood explored in these plays, I must point out that the plays offer alternative womanhood by restoring power, freedom and eminence at the end of the stories.

The re-enactment of Ganga's story explores the traditional definition of a woman as incomplete without being a mother. In this performance, Ganga rejects a marriage proposal from her lover, Santanu King of Hastinapura because of the pressure she forced to have children. According to Santanu, a childless woman is unnatural: Santanu says "you are a woman. It is your function [to bear children]" (125). Santanu's comment suggests that he does not detach womanhood from motherhood. Another male character, Bhishma, reinforces this idea of compulsory motherhood: "[Ganga] owes it to us to become a mother … It is your duty to have children. (*Pushes her forward to Santanu*.) Take her … by force. She is your wife, you have every right" (127). From Bhishma's chauvinistic perception, a woman is a natural debtor who can only pay her debt by adhering to the customs of femininity and motherhood. This mentality is condemned in the play by Ganga's successful refusal to be a mother despite it being considered as a social norm. What is also suggested from Ganga's deviance is that unconventional women's choices invite censure from others. Thus, Santanu's mother, an unapologetic agent of patriarchy and a custodian of men's privilege, calls Ganga horrible names such as "whore", "not a woman" and "witch" (126). These names decisively portray the image of an abused and non-conformist woman. The stigma attached to Ganga's choice is grave and could be unbearable to some women. But Ganga is not moved by this, she is resilient and defends her choice which ultimately requires her to leave Santanu on her own accord. The play employs the metaphor of abortion to describe this situation: As Ganga says, "it was a matter of abort or be aborted" (27). Ganga would rather abort her plan of becoming Santanu's wife than let her dream of living a child-free life be destroyed. As the play suggests, the position of a woman is defined from the perspective of whom she is attached to, namely her husband and children. These chauvinistic male characters, Santanu and Bhishma, opine that it is the responsibility of every woman to aspire to become good wife and mother, a similar teaching that Mama passes to her daughter, Faramola in *Abobaku*. When they refuse to take up these roles, they should be forced into it. Ganga's refusal to be boxed in by societal configuration is commendable; however, as I go on to discuss, the unsupportive reactions from other woman remain puzzling and disturbing.

Gandhari is female character in the play who aligns with patriarchy. Her arrival in the new space is completely dissimilar to other independence-seeking women. She only comes to the new space because other women to with whom she is aquatinted have left the epic. Arriving in the third space somewhat later than the other characters, Gandhari is princess and wife of Dhritrashtra, the blind king of Hastinapura, of the original *Mahabarata*. Gandhari is the mother of one hundred sons. Dedicated to her sons and husband, she opted to be blindfolded on the day of her wedding in solidarity with her husband who is blind. As a conformist to patriarchal norms, she is dissatisfied with the tenets of this new space as it does not give reverence to tradition. The sensitive Draupadi expresses her displeasure with Ghandari's adherence to tradition:

> Draupadi: I am sorry but I get so angry when I look at her and see how she is wasting her life.
>
> Gandhari: Wasting my life? What does she mean? I have dedicated my whole existence to my husband and my children. I put on this blindfold to join my husband Dhritarashtra in his blindness so that he would understand he had a true, faithful and obedient wife. I bore him a hundred sons.
>
> Draupadi: And what about you? What do you want for yourself?
>
> Ghandari: I just told you. I want to be a good wife and mother (117).

Draupadi is annoyed with Gandhari because of the later's conscious decision to sanction patriarchy by way of submitting herself completely to the whims of her husband and her hundred sons. Out of anger, Draupadi charges toward Gandhari to remove her blindfold but she is stopped by the calm Ganga who asks Draupadi if she wants "to go back to the epic … [where she] can force people to do what [she] wants" (117). The actions of these two important characters in the play alludes to two important versions of Western feminism – radical and liberal feminism. Draupadi can be seen to represent a more radical feminist tradition based on agitation for practical and drastic measures against patriarchy while Ganga stands for those who agitate for more liberal methods of achieving gender equality by refusing to adopt the methods of their oppressors. Speaking about Ganga's stance, Neelima notes that "Ganga possesses a counter-hegemonic agency and utilizes her newly gained freedom for [the] articulation of negotiation and meaning" (2014:290). As in Yerima's plays, *Flight* is characterized by the polyphony of contradictory perspectives rather than gender consensus.

As Neelima also notes, freedom and choice are important features of the third space: it provides "liberation [and] also the power of dominance" (2014:290) for the women. This freedom is also extended to men. For example, Brihannala, one of the only two male characters in the play, refuses to marry Draupadi because, in this space, he too has the unchallenged liberty to acknowledge and defend his sexual orientation. Brihinnala's new found freedom adversely affects his lover Draupadi. Faced with rejection from Brihinnala, she lapses back into the patriarchal ideologies of the epic and angrily submits to conventional femininity: "women [are] born to be mothers and wives. That is what [they] were in the epic. That is [their] birthright and [they] should be proud of it" (135). Insisting on an essentialist understanding of womanhood and motherhood, Draupadi questions women's autonomy and subscribes to the social definition of women as imperfect and incomplete in themselves without men, an idea she had previously rejected. Her position, I would suggest, could be described as selective feminism: due to her desire to be married to Brihinnala, Draupadi decides to carefully select that part of feminist politics that suits her at that particular moment even though the beliefs are generally seen as derogatory to women. Draupadi's sudden declaration that it is the birthright of women to be mothers addresses the pertinence of existentialism which gives preference to personal or individual choices and ideological preferences over what is considered as generally essential. Draupadi's preferential inclination to selective femininity therefore suggests that personal or individual positions at certain moments dictate what one supports or opposes.

As a further exploration of womanhood/motherhood, I cite American feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow, who argues that "women's capacities for mothering and abilities to get gratification from it are strongly internalised and psychologically enforced, and are built developmentally into the feminine psychic structure" (1978:39). Chodorow's disavowal of the position of social gratification and motherhood automatically leads to enforced mothering which clearly negate the conceptual understanding of motherhood from the African viewpoint. As Catherine Acholonu, argues, the concept of 'motherism' offers, an alternation African concept to western feminism:

> [Motherism is] anchored on the matrix of motherhood which is central to African metaphysics and has been the basis of the survival and unity of the black race through the ages. Whatever Africa's role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from her quintessential position as the Mother Continent of humanity, nor is it coincidental that motherhood has remained the central focus of African art, African literature (especially women's writing), African culture, African psychology, oral traditions and empirical

> philosophy. Africa's alternative to western feminism is MOTHERISM and Motherism denotes motherhood". (Achlonu, 1995:3)

In Acholonu's description, motherhood is paramount within the African cultural belief system because it has helped to unite the black race and continues to be pivotal in the African space. Writing about motherhood in the Indian context, Patricia Uberioi cites Indian scholar, Dhondo Keshav Karves who observes that "to be childless is to miss heaven" (Karve in Uberoi: 1993:58). Since India shares many historical and socio-political similarities with some countries in Africa, both post-colonial, Acholonu's motherism would seem to be a concept that is applicable in both contexts. The Hindu legal text, *Manusmriti* which is believed to have been given by *Manu*, the progenitor of mankind, to a group of seers, or *rishis*, contains the following injunction: "as a girl, [she must] obey and seek protection from her father, as a young woman her husband, and as a widow her son; and that a woman should always worship her husband as a god" (cited by Olivelle, 2005:98). This Hindu belief is dangerously identical to what Tambu observes of her mother in *Nervous Conditions*: "most of her life my mother's mind, belonging first to her father and then to her husband, had not been hers to make up" (1988:155). Despite the generational and cultural gap between these ideals, we see that female subservience transcends time and culture.

Returning to the discussion of the play, the positions of mothers in both the first and the third spaces are exclusively different. In the epic, mothers are revered for being mothers – especially mothers of sons – while in the new world, women chose not to be mothers and, therefore, the idea of motherhood is intentionally treated with less reverence. In their new space, many of the women who speak about motherhood see it as an enforced position, one that is not entirely the wish of women and one which ultimately limits personal exploration of themselves and their bodies. When Ganga arrives in the new space, the first thing she does is to remove all physical garment that associates her with tradition:

> Get rid of this ridiculous crown and with it the *crazy notion that I have to be divine in order to be the mother of a hero* of the *Mahabarath*. Women, I want you to bear witness: I give up this crown and with it *the enslaving tradition of motherhood.* Kunthi: Have you ever wanted to be a mother? Ganga: *Never* (116) (emphasis added).

Despite accepting that she was treated with honour and dignity as a princess and mother of heroes, Ganga never liked the idea of being a mother. This explains why she is eager to get rid of the physical attire that associates her with motherhood. Rather than being a mother: respected for her

mothering exploits towards her husband and children, she alludes to being "like a river, free flowing, creating [her] own path" (117). This figurative expression validates her rejection of motherhood as it is considered restrictive, an obstacle in her path of self-realization.

Another character, Subhadra shares a similar view when she articulates that: "I couldn't be myself there [in the epic]. I was either Krishna's sister or Arjun's second wife or Abhimanyu's mother; but in myself I was nobody. I don't ever want to go back" (118). Subhadra regrets the fact that, on their own (in the epic), women are nothing except in relation to men. This perception of women in relation to men and domesticity is equally condemned in Ghanaian playwright Efo Kodjo Mawugbe's text, *In the Chest of a Woman* (2008) where he presents women as strong not weaker vessels and not for men's use. In the play, Mawugbe asserts that, "in the chest of a woman is not only an extension of the breast and a feeble heart, but a strong desire to possess and use power" (Mawugbe, 2008:36). *Flight* portends that being a woman and being a mother are human states that are different and should not classified as one and the same. While being a woman is a biological state which cannot be decided by one at birth, mothering or motherhood should be considered as a matter of choice.

The last concern in relation to womanhood and motherhood in this section is the play's exploration of stigmatization of women and their lack of agency. Selected women in the play are stigmatized as a result of their indifference to some of the social tenets of femininity. As the characters create a new world for themselves, they recollect some of the unpleasant ways in which they were treated in the epic. In the last story told and acted in the play, a hut in a village catches fire after been struck by lightning which results into the death of two children: "The incensed villagers believe that Hidimba is a witch and is responsible" (136). Hidimba, is accused of witchcraft without any proof except that she lives alone, does not have a child and makes healing medicines with herbs. Because of her non-conformity to the demands of marriage and childbearing, Hidimba is deemed unfit to live in the village: "The group surrounds her, picksup stones and begin to stone her" (136). Radha, her friends comes to protect her but runs the risk of being accused too:

> Radha: How do you know she did it? Ganga [Now acting the role of a villager]: Who else would do such a horrible thing? Radha: Everything is so dry around here. The hut could have easily caught alight. Sikandi (Villager): Yes, that's another thing; this drought. It's her wickedness that has caused it. Brihinnala (Villager): Look in her bag, you'll see proof

> there. Ganga (Villager); It is full of body parts. Radha picks up bag, emptys it in front of them. All kinds of herbs and roots fall out. (136)

From the dialogue, it is observed that the villagers have no proof of their accusations. One of them accuses her of using magical powers to turn the assumed body parts into herbs and roots but Radha asks them, "did you check her bag before you accused her? "We didn't have to; we all know Hadimba is a witch" (136). The situation gets more critical when the villagers consult a *shima* (a sorcerer) who confirms that Hidimba is a witch and must be sacrificed to the ancestors. As the villagers look around for Hidimba to kill, rain starts falling. Whatever they cannot comprehend, they spiritualise and, whatever is spiritualised, is represented symbolically. Because the villagers cannot understand why the rains are not falling, they spiritualize it by accusing Hidimba, a non-conformist to social womanhood and motherhood of witchcraft and the *shima* is presented as a spiritual symbol that backs traditional norms. If Hadimba or the other accused were found and killed as a form of sacrifice to the ancestors before the rain, the shima would have taken all the praises he does not deserve. The concerns raised here tend to mirror and to ask same questions that Judith Butler asks: "Is there some commonality among 'women' that preexists their oppression, or do 'women' have a bond by virtue of their oppression alone? Is there a specificity to women's cultures that is independent of their subordination by hegemonic, masculinist cultures?" (1990:5). Hadimba's victimhood status preexists her birth since she, like other women presented in the epic, are born and nurtured into a hegemonic culture against which they are powerless bar the adoption of the strategy of physical relocation.

"I am not a man": A Rejection of Hegemonic Masculinity and Gender Straight-Jacketing

Having explored the play's negotiation of womanhood, wifehood and motherhood, it is proper to go on to explore how masculinity which works synchronously with femininity is depicted in the play. If being a woman, wife and mother are presented as social gender roles ascribed to the female sex, often against their wishes, then masculinity, too, entails culturally assigned attributes, behaviors and roles ascribed to the male sex. Out of all the characters in the play, only nine are named, others are simply called women. In addition, only two of more than a dozen characters are male. As discussed earlier, a similar gender ratio is presented in *Little Drops*. In *Flight*, the two male characters, Brihinnala and Sikandi, seek to escape the epic out of dissatisfaction with its

patriarchal conventions. Initially, the men are prevented from joining up with the women, but because these men portray themselves as victims of patriarchy and declare their openness to change, the women allow them to join:

> Ganga: … Now tell us, why do you come here?
>
> Brihinnala: If you would allow us, we would like to join you.
>
> Women: Join us!
>
> Ganga: We are a group of women, why do you want to join us?
>
> Sikandi: We cannot continue to live at odds with ourselves.
>
> Draupadi: What do you mean?
>
> Hidimba: But if you have left the epic why do you retain your masculine form? You have the freedom to change.
>
> Sikandi: Are you going to exclude us because we are men?
>
> Ganga: Why do you want to join us?
>
> Brihinnala: We want to be free.
>
> Radha: You, Arjun, of all people, you had freedom. You had opportunity to become the most renowned warrior. … You were the darling of the gods. What more did you want?
>
> Brihinala: But I wasn't myself.
>
> Sikandi: We are both victims, just as you are. Your roles made you uncomfortable; ours did too.
>
> Radha: Why didn't you fight for freedom in the epic?
>
> Sikandi: Traditions! We could not get past traditions.
>
> Draupadi: They want what we want. Let them join us.
>
> Radha: No. How do we know that they are not here to sabotage us?
>
> Brihinnala: We want to be free just like you.
>
> Ganga: But what will you do here? We have banned war. We don't have a place for warriors.
>
> Brihinnala: That is why I have come here. I am sick of war. I am a dancer, musician and story teller.
>
> Radha: Now this is unbelievable. You, the greatest living warrior? You are prepared to give up glory, fame and reputation to be a dancer?
>
> Brihinnala: Yes, I am (119).

The most striking insights into masculinity in this excerpt are provided in the words of men. The simplicity and directness through which these characters speak to masculinity allows for audiences to understand how gender roles can be detrimental to humans. First the audience is given the perspective of women who are often on the receiving end of masculine exhibitions but then the perspective shifts to that of men who are the carriers and perpetrators of masculinity. According to Brihannala and Sikanda, the dictates of masculinity represent an unwanted social demand imposed on men and male children. To relay this, the play presents Brihinnala and Sikandi as victims of social norms: Sikandi regrets that they "could not go past [the] tradition" of the epic which enforces masculinity on them as men and because they have been made to believe and observe traditions and customs, men bury and repress their discomfort so as to allow them to display unpleasant demands of the society.

Brihinnala continues with his rejection and condemnation of masculinity through his refusal of Draupadi's marital proposition and his determination to stick to the freedom he has achieved in the newly-found space. And for so doing, Draupadi accuses him of effeminacy – an accusatory and discriminatory remark mostly levelled against homosexual men and other men who display the 'effeminate' characteristics of marginalized masculinity as Connell describes it. The dialogue below ensues between these characters as they both attempt to prove their contrasting points:

> Draupadi: (*confronting Brihinnala*.) Are you denying that you are Arjun?
>
> Brihinnala: Yes I am. I choose to be Brihinnala.
>
> Draupadi: But why? Arjun is noble … courageous and an intrepid warrior.
>
> Brihinnala: I don't want to be a warrior. Look at how Arjun was brought up. He was trained in the martial arts. He was taught to kill and he became very good at it.
>
> Draupadi: Yes. You are the bravest and most devastating fighter. Noble, handsome and the soul of propriety; forerunner of the knight of the round table.
>
> Brihinnala: Look at me, do I look like a knight?
>
> Draupadi: This is a disguise. And it is a wonderful disguise. Even, I found it distasteful. Brihinnala: What is a man? Someone who proves himself by killing? Someone who beats women? Someone superior to women? Someone whose authority depends on women's servitude? If a man is all that, then you are quite right; I am not a man. (134)

I consider Brihinnala's point of view a critical aspect of masculinity which has been explored within gender scholarship. Writing on the effect of masculinity as a social norm, American author, Sandy Ruxton reckons that "conformity to restrictive definitions of masculinity can lead to disengaged fatherhood, poor health, aggression, overwork and a lack of emotional responsiveness, as well as lead to risk-taking behavior" (2004:10). Betty Freidan also observes that men are not really the enemy but are fellow victims suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill (1963). From Brihinnala's description of his life in the epic, we see that he repressed his emotions, embraced aggressiveness and took risks such as going to the war front. These behavioural patterns, which he does not support, are considered 'unmanly behaviours'. Therefore, despite Draupadi's consistent and irritating pressure to make him adhere to the tenets of manliness, Brihinnala insists on his unpopular choice of 'effeminacy'. This choice is noted by Draupadi when she says that she finds his rejection of masculinity and his embrace of effeminacy distasteful. It is interesting to see how a woman, who is considered the 'other' and victim of man's misogyny forces and even hates a man for his decision to reject masculinity. She goes as far as reminding him of the features of masculinity such as nobility, courageousness, handsomeness, 'knight-in-shining armor' qualities which she thinks he possesses, but these do not persuade him. Draupadi's position here as a woman who aligns herself with the tenets of patriarchy can be linked with what Solanas calls "Daddy's Girl – a female who is passive, adaptable, respectful … and allows [men] to induce their chatter on them … [who panders] to the needs of men" (1978:8). However, Brihinnala questions the social definition of a man as presented to him in the epic and in the new space by Draupadi as he aims to negate the heroic understanding of masculinity and manliness in the play. He completely renounces the violent, aggressive and emotionless qualities of manliness and therefore claims that if he has to display such characteristics to be classified a man, he would rather not be one. The features of masculinity listed and condemned by Brihinnala are similar to Connell's. She proves that hegemonic masculinity requires man's emotionlessness which is why they are able to kill. Solanas also condemns this attribute of a man when she claims that "the male is emotionally limited; … males are emotional cripples … [they have] no compassion or ability to empathize" (1978:1-2). Despite Draupadi's attempt to force masculinity on him, Brihinnala's resoluteness and desire to be different and 'not be a man' overrides her burning desire. Brihinnala's victory portends that men can choose to boycott the social pressure of masculinity and be what they desire to.

Another enactment of masculinity presented in the play comes via the over-romanticized *Swayamvara* ceremony – a traditional marriage ceremony where a woman chooses her husband from many suitors. During this ceremony, the bride-to-be herself can forcefully be taken away by any man who is able to take her away by a means of brute force. The play presents this practice as violent, disrespectful and as another form of rape and defilement. Adopting the literary device of intertextuality, Bhishma, the same character who demands that Ganga has a child, justifies his forceful abduction of Amba by literally quoting from a book: "Of all the ways of choosing a bride, the sages have mentioned, the noblest is that in which a maiden is acquired by force from amidst a valiant gathering …' This is a direct quote from R.K Narayan's book, *The Mahabharat*, London, 1978, page four" (129). The playwright employs this method of writing to provide theoretical background or impetus for her choice to explore the Indian S*wayamvara*. As noted earlier, *Swayamwara* is used as a metaphor for rape in the context of this play. Even though it does not involve immediate act of forceful sexual intercourse, the abducted woman will ultimately become his wife and a mother as the norms of the epic require. Contradicting Bhisma's definition of *Swayamwara,* Urvasi, another of the oppressed women in the epic notes that, *Swayamwara* is another way of "glorifying rape" (129). This polarizing view go a long way to suggest that what the ceremony means to women is antithetical to what it is to men. In the new world, they attempt as much as possible not to feature any violent acts of masculinity such as war and rape, but because according to Urvasi "rape is a very common problem. We may have banished it from our new world but they (*pointing to the audience*) have not" (129). Urvasi considers silence as approval. For her, to meet such a serious concern with silence is hypocriticl but discussing it is a step toward curtailing it. This gesture of speaking to the audience – a Brechtian style - is an attempt to address the seriousness of this issue. In India especially, the occurrence of rape is currently amongst the highest in the world (Kumar 2003).

Still exploring the subject of *Swayamwara* as a metaphor for rape, the women re-enact an incident of the epic through a play within the play. The story of Amba, one of the three women (the others are Ambika and Ambalika, daughters of Kashya, the King of Kashi) whose *Swayamwara* is taking place is acted out in the new space. Bhishma abducts these women and delivers them to his brothers to marry since he has sworn himself to celibacy. However, a dialogue takes place between Salwa and Amba: while Amba considers her abduction as rape and violation, Salwa, by contrast, sees it differently:

> Amba: He assaulted my right as a human being. How can you respect that?
>
> Salwa: What he did was perfectly legal. In fact, it was sublime. A tradition for the bravest of the brave. If we don't respect traditions, we cannot have a civilized society.
>
> Amba: Is that a law? A law that allows me to be violated? You call that civilized?
>
> Salwa: He has not dishonoured you. He has paid you the highest compliment a man can offer. He demonstrated his supreme manhood, his incomparable courage for you. (131)

Salwa stands by the custom that declares this act legal but the victim, Amba, sees it as a violation of both her rights and her body. The difference in these characters' views is significant and links with standpoint theory which posits that the position where one stands determines one's perspective on different issues. As the play shows later on, Amba's life becomes miserable after this act; she decides to go into exile by living in the forest. The *Swayamwara* action suggests that man is often defined by his ability to be impressive in the eyes of women, and sometimes men; in this practice, the play suggests, women are rendered to be nothing in themselves but only trophies for these impressive men. In this play, the women condemn their status in the epic as trophies of, dependent on, and attached to men and children in the patriarchal world. In the conversation below, Brihinnala and Sikandi also reject the social belief that patriarchy is absolutely beneficial to men:

> Ganga: They really don't know us, the women. If you ask them out there, they can only identify us as mother of, wife of, sister of, but not as individuals in our own right.
>
> Sikandi: That is how they know me too, as an instrument; if they know me at all. Brihinnala: It is not just woman who are trapped. We are too. Just because we get the actions does not make us any the less puppets.
>
> Draupadi: I don't know why you're complaining. Men control everything; what we do, think and believe. You're a man; you can make choices.
>
> Brihinnala: That's not true. From the time you're little, people keep stuffing toy weapons in your hands and pushing you towards violence.
>
> Draupadi: No, no. It is different for men. You are not trapped by your gender.
>
> Sikandi: Bri is right, you know. With our customs and traditions, we keep building cages for ourselves, for both men and women. (127)

In the gender scheme of things, Brihinnala and Sikandi make it clear to Draupadi that just as pressure is placed on women to fulfill the societal requirements of femininity, men are likewise

compelled to abide by the obligations of masculinity before they can be regarded as true men. Draupadi, finds the perspective of Brihinnala and Sikandi unbelievable because, to her, as men, they are socially designed as superior to, and controllers of, women's life and are, therefore, beneficiaries of patriarchal dividends.

Positioning Sexuality in *Flight*

Not only does the play explore questions of gender and gender oppression in human society, it also addresses the subject of sexuality with verve and ingenuousness. It is the only play in this study which uses the interlocking framework of sexuality as an intersectional subject along with other concerns such as gender, gender inequality and patriarchy. While *At Her Feet* intersects with race and religion, other plays seem to address the concerns of gender and patriarchy exclusively. However, *Flight* intersects these more familiar gender subjects with sexuality, a topic that is as crucial as the other concerns in all the plays. According to Steven Mock & Richard Eibach (2012), "[s]exual orientation is typically defined by the nature of one's sexual attraction to men, women, or both" (641). A similar definition is given by the American Psychological Association (APA): sexuality is as "an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions" (2008:1). Sexuality has to do with the way one expresses one's attraction to people. The subject of sexuality remains hotly debated despite numerous scholarly works. Among these debates is the explanation for human sexual choice. According to Mary Ann Lamanna et. al, "the reason some individuals develop a gay sexual identity has not been definitively established – nor do we yet understand the development of heterosexuality" (2014:82). Speaking further on the ambiguity surrounding the causes of people's sexual choice, APA suggests that a variety of factors impact on a person's sexuality. APA furthers its argument by stating that sexual orientation is not a choice that can be changed at will, and that sexual orientation is most likely the result of a complex interaction of environmental, cognitive and biological factors. And that these factors play significant role in a person's sexuality (2010). Following a similar line of thought, Gail Wiscarz Stuart argues that "no conclusive evidence supports any one specific cause of homosexuality;

however, most researchers agree that biological and social factors influence the development of sexual orientation" (2014:52).

The various remarks provide an important basis for an analysis of the way sexuality is depicted in the play. Throughout the narrative, Brihinnala unashamedly condemns masculinity and rather takes sides with the female other. As the story proceeds, it is discovered that Brihinnala is a homosexual; his decision to leave the epic is thus based on the unaccommodating space that was afforded him there. We discover that, despite Brihinnala's greatness, and the nobility and respect he acquired in the epic for his manly and heroic qualities, he lived outside of who he really was; he lived to satisfy the demands of the epic. As Sikandi puts it, they (the men) "couldn't get past tradition" (119) and therefore, lived against themselves and their sexual identity.

The subject of sexuality begins as the characters decide to explore or re-enact the story of Sikandi. Before I continue, I need to establish the ambiguity regarding the sexuality of Sikandi in many versions of the original *Mahabarata* script. Different versions of the *Mahabharata* have seen Sikandi's gender differently. For some, Sikandi was born a female, died a female and was reborn male. To some, she was born a female, grew and changed into a male, a gender she was not comfortable with, and after he died, he was reborn a male. In all these versions, what seems clear is that Sikandi possesses or performs both genders at different times in her/his life. However, in this play, he is seen as a male who is involved romantically with Brihinnala. As a little boy, Sikandi is seen practicing for the masculine performance of stick fighting due to take place later the same day. Rather than wear the conventional costume (animal skin) for the performance, he costumes himself in a woman's dress and applies make-up. When his friend comes in, rather than follow the culture of the society and criticize Sikandi, he compliments him on how beautiful he looks. But at the return of his mother and his aunt, he is scolded: according to his aunt, "he is haunted … he is possessed too … I think Amba has taken over his body … he needs help … he must be exorcised" (133). A *shaman* is called to their home, and at the end of the exorcism, the child "is left lying and exhausted and unhappy" (133). While his mother prepares to feed him, Sikandi gets up, puts on the woman's dress he had worn earlier and leaves the house, never to return.

Different facets of sexual orientation and identity are highlighted through Sikanda's story. The first aspect is the biological validation which Sikandi's story offers sexual identity. Within sexuality discourse, two dynamics have been hypothesized as the determinant of one's sexual

choice although none of them have yet been given scientific backing or proof. (Ross & Rapp 1981; Peiss, Simmons & Padgug, 1989; Spencer, Nevid & Lois 2007). This ambiguity is also suggested in the play. Sikandi's audience is shown the biological aspect of his sexual identity. We see that being homosexual comes naturally to Sikandi without environmental or peer influence. He identifies with the female sex in terms of his behavioural and habitual dispositions rather than with the male. However, due to his mother's continuous rejection and the fact that he is a minor, he is not able to naturally disclose and display this identity. His mother's continuous rejection of his sexual choice leads him to leave his home to follow Brihinnala. The information provided in the play suggests that Sikandi's sexual disposition come to him biologically and not through environmental association.

The second aspect of sexuality as presented in the play is the acceptance of heteronomativity as ideal. Sexuality in the epic is treated in a conservative and traditional way where homosexuality is abhorred. This means that being any sexual identity contradictory to heterosexual is considered unnatural, untraditional and a form of bewitchment. Sikandi's mother's rejection of his sexual choice is a testament to this. Her sister uses words such as, "the boy is possessed", "Amba has taken over his body", "he is haunted", "he needs help" (133) to describe the boy. This description suggests that the child's mental health is placed in question. The extreme measures taken by Sikandi's mother and his aunt alludes to the spiritual or religious disposition that is often attached to prejudiced beliefs about sexuality. In contrast to the conservatism of the epic space, the new space opens a new world of freedom of identity both in terms of gender and sexually.

Brihinnala confesses in a conversation with Draupadi how the epic misrepresented him:

> Draupadi: No, no. It's different for me. You are not trapped by your gender.
>
> Brihinnala: Yes, I was. Draupadi (*Laughing sarcastically*): The only time you were trapped was when you were forced to disguise yourself as Brihinnala.
>
> Brihinnala: It was the only time I was not trapped. (127)

Draupadi believes that all men are pleased with the social configuration of maleness but Brihinnala makes her understand that not all men are comfortable with the pressure the society puts on them to be men. The phrase "trapped in gender" used by Draupadi here can be said to align with a common LGBT term: 'coming out of the closet' (Butler 1991); (Chauncey 1994). The trapped victims of sexuality are identified and the flight that Brihinnala and Sikandi take could represent

their adopted technique of coming out of the closet. It also suggests that gender and sexual enforcement is a kind of prison created by the society from which humans need to be emancipated. The implication of this flight is that it allows authenticity in place of pretense. That is, Brihinnala is being original when tradition thinks he is being illusory and dramatic. In his way, the play suggests that traditionalism takes away authenticity from humanity.

In conclusion, the women's creation of what can be termed utopian space as against the dystopian space from whence they come connotes women's adoption of the alternative action of resisting and defeating tradition. The women's flight from the epic also alludes to Friedan's claim that women are ready to articulate their status as being more than wives, mothers and sisters; it also corroborates Muwagbe's assertion that women are more than the biological and social definitions that the society has given to them. Through their active resistance by way of the physical repositioning and psychological reimagining of their space, the women not only acquire the desired liberty, they also create the kind of world they wish to live in. In so doing, they empower themselves against external influences. The play's deconstruction of prominent gender concerns such as womanhood/motherhood, gender roles, S*wayamvara*/rape, masculinity and sexuality not only address unpopular gender concerns within Africa in early 1990s; it also addresses gender issues that continue to be prominent socio-political concerns in present-day African states. The play thus maintains its relevance in the twenty-first century. From another view, the play's creation and definition of a new space as a place of freedom, liberty and 'self-owning' which, using Soja's arguments, I understand as a kind of third space is important for the analysis of the play's treatment of gender concerns. My analysis agrees with Soja's assertion thta, the new women's space allows for " subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history (1996:57). Equally, the play's exploration of spatiality in terms of the way it oscillates between the past and the present, its re-representation of the past and its implicit view into the future makes it one that synchronizes with Soja's argument.

With the careful analyses of this play, it is clear that it explores more of radical approaches to gender oppression, it reinforces the need for women-alone space, and also questions masculinity and gender roles. In this sense, it's concerns align with those of the other two plays, *Weemen* and

So What's New?, examined in this chapter. It's particular concern with redefining womanhood links it with the preoccupations of *So What's New?* in particular. The way that all three plays resolve the action by giving liberation to women makes them feminist plays as gender concerns are highlighted and resolved not only by empowering women but also by establishing that women are proactive and powerful enough to define the course of their lives.

CHAPTER SIX: RELIGION, PATRIARCHY AND WESTERN STEREOTYPES OF THE MUSLIM WOMAN: AN EXAMINATION OF NADIA DAVIDS' *AT HER FEET*

The final chapter of this thesis is devoted to an analysis of the work of popular South African playwright, Nadia Davids, one of several playwrights to have emerged in the post-1994, post-transitional (Samuelson, 2008; Frenkel and MacKenzie, 2010) period. As in the previous chapters, the concern here is to consider the ways in which questions of gender and patriarchy are addressed and negotiated in Davids' work. The particular focus of this chapter is David's first play, *At Her Feet*, first performed in 2002 and subsequently published by Oshun Books in 2006.

Davids grew up and was educated in Cape Town, South Africa. Besides *At Her Feet*, other works of drama include *Cissie Gool* (2008), a play which tells the story of prominent Cape Town anti-apartheid activist, Cissie Gool and, more recently, *What Remains* (2017) which deals with slavery, racism and nostalgia. She is also the author of the novel, *An Imperfect Blessing* (2013), a story about a family's turmoil as apartheid comes to an end and the new South Africa begins to emerge. This troubled family tries to find a space and identity for themselves both politically and economically. Each of these works reveal a sustained preoccupation with politics (local and international), religion, racism, gender, patriarchy, resistance, and social class. *At Her Feet* focuses on the interrelated questions of religion, gender, patriarchy, culture and racism, with a particular emphasis on South African Muslim communities in Cape Town. As in the plays of Ahmed Yerima, *At Her Feet* makes women's experience its primary focus. As I go on to argue, what distinguishes Davids' concerns with women's experience in *At Her Feet* is the emphasis it places on transnational connections and alliances; specifically, the desire to draw links between Muslim women residing in Cape Town and other Muslim women across the world. Of particular concern is the experience of women in contexts of religious intolerance. Another key difference in comparison withs the plays of Yerima is that the exploration of gender oppression is closely linked to the post 9/11 context. In contrast to the intra-national or intra-cultural topics explored in Yerima's plays, Davids' *At Her Feet* considers more global questions that pertain to Islam and Muslim women around the world.

Originally published in 2006, *At Her Feet* has been performed both locally and internationally. The first performance of the play took place in 2002 at the Arena Theatre at the University of Cape Town. Subsequent renditions include a performance at the Warehouse Theatre as part of the 2002 Cape Town Festival; the Box Theatre in Grahamstown in 2003; the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town

in 2004, the Afro Vibes festival in Amsterdam in September 2004, the Market Theatre in 2009, and the London Book Fair for three consecutive nights, from 15th to 17th of April 2010. Since then the play has received acclaim for the relevance of its social concerns as well as for its engaging dramatic style. In a review published in an online by media site 'Arts and Culture', South African author, journalist and theatre enthusiast, Chris Thurman, observes that the play is "a timely intervention, exploring thorny issues [such as Islamophobia] from a Muslim perspective (with a particularly South African inflection), exposing the false assumptions of many non-Muslims about Islam but at the same time offering a critique of the faith and its practices from within" (2009:1). Another reviewer of the play is American attorney and writer Carol M. Kaplan who, after watching the performance of the play in Cape Town in 2003, observed that the play "invites audiences to listen to women who are articulate, self-aware (to differing degrees), and vocal about their own experiences of struggle and injustice" (2005:729). She goes on to assert that:

> the play … serve[s] as [an] example of the tremendously powerful stories being told by women theater artists in South Africa grappling with issues of law, justice, and women's human rights in a society that continues to transform itself. The story inscribes new identities, new complexities, and new insights into the shared and emerging culture of the country. (738)

Another way of gauging contemporary audiences' response to the play is a description of one of the performances by the playwright in an interview with Leila Davids, who is also the playwright's sister:

> There was a group of about eight very conservatively dressed women in their 40's and 50's who came to watch the play. I must admit that something inside me tightened up before the show. I hoped nobody would be offended or upset, because it is not my aim to be disrespectful. I felt so shamed by my pre-judgment, because after the show these women came up to Quanita [the actress] and me [sic] and they hugged us for doing the show. They thanked us for saying things that they themselves had not been able to. That made the whole process worthwhile. (2006:70)

Davids had thought that older women – like the character in the play, Auntie Kariema – would be offended by the play's confrontational approach to some Islamic principles but, to her surprise, these women were pleased to encounter a woman speaking about issues relating to their lives. Responses of these kinds indicate the appreciation that many oppressed and voiceless women feel when women, rather than men, speak about them and for them.

A further indication of audience response to the performance of the play took the form of an informal study conducted by Nadia Davids along with the actress, Quanita Adams who played the roles of all six characters in the play. In this study, Davids and Adams monitored audience reactions in three different South African locations where the play was performed. They paid special attention to the audiences' responses to the character Auntie Kariema. The results are intriguing: "In Cape Town, Muslim audiences laughed with Aunty Kariema, something that Adams says made her slightly uncomfortable. In Johannesburg, they laughed at her and in Grahamstown, they made her [as a performer] cringe, which, Davids says, was just what [the production and performance crew] wanted" (cited in von Klemper, 2003:11). For the Cape Town audiences, there was a sense of connection with the character, in Johannesburg, she was a figure of ridicule and in Grahamstown, she was a figure of scorn because of her lack of empathy Azra.

As these reviews and responses suggest, the play situates its concerns with gender and gender inequality alongside other concerns of human identity and experience such as race, politics and class. As such it can be seen to align with arguments made by Western feminist critic, Cora Kaplan who suggests – in line with the perspectives of African feminism – that "a feminist literary criticism that privileges gender in isolation from other forms of social determination offers us a similarly partial reading of the role played by sexual difference in literary discourse, a reading bled dry of its most troubling and contradictory meanings" (1986:148). Elaine Showalter also notes this when she declares that "talking about gender without a commitment to dismantling sexism, racism and homophobia, can degenerate into nothing more than a talk show" (Showalter, 1989:10). The play's observation and treatment of these subjects take it an example of a work that carefully explores the concept of intersectionality.

Coined in 1987 by African-American feminist, legal and racial scholar, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, intersectionality explores the relationships between race, gender, politics and the economy. According to Sarah Gamble, intersectionality refers to the "intersections between different groups of minorities; specifically, [it entails] the study of the interactions of multiple systems of oppression or discrimination" (2001:25). It is important to explore this analytical method because it embraces many aspects of human identity discourses. Showalter makes this point when she argues that "feminist critics should recognize that the meaning of gender needs to be interpreted within a variety of historical, national, racial, and sexual contexts" (1989:4). For

Showalter, in order to seriously and diligently explore gender, there are among others, several factors critics need to harness. Davids' play explores these concerns carefully and therefore represents an example of a text which examines human intersections. *At Her Feet* can be seen as engaging intersectionality because different systems of oppressions such as race, gender, economy and politics are explored. The link between race and gender allows for the play to speak about topics that arise in the South African social matrix. In the Cape Town Indian-Malay context, these issues include Islamophobia, racism, honour killing and international politics.

Dramatic Aesthetic: Exploration of Poor Theatre in *At Her Feet*

At Her Feet is a one-woman play which opens with a single female figure standing on an almost empty stage. This near-empty space, as shall later be discovered, reminds audiences that what they are watching is a mere play and not reality. This means that the play has to be stripped of theatre features such as complex stagecraft, props, and excessive costuming which links it to what Polish theatre director, Jerzy Grotowski, calls poor theater. For Grotowski, theatre should "gradually eliminat[e] whatever proved superfluous, theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects" (1968:19). In this spirit, *At Her Feet* takes the form of six separate but inter-linked scenes, with the shift in location and character indicated only by the onstage changing of costume.

The play opens with a monologue given by Azra al Jamal. The setting is Jordan. Azral has just been murdered for speaking to a man who is not her relative, an act which is considered dishonourable in terms of the religious beliefs of her community. The murder of this fourteen-year old girl is not shown; rather the character who is dead walks on stage and describes how she was stoned to death by a group of men. The setting of the play then switches from Jordan to Cape Town, South Africa. While on stage, the actress playing Azra changes her costume – "full hijab and burkha" (25) – in order to assume the role of the next character, Sara Jacobs, who is described in the stage directions as wearing "black pants and a top" (26-27) under the burkha. Sara is an educated and well-informed South African woman in her twenties who lives in Cape Town. Once she has changed, Sara immediately recites and performs a poem she titles 'The Scarf'. In the poem, she looks at the scarf from different dimensions including its physical appearance, its function as

a covering for the hair as well the beautification apparel it performs. Introducing an important theme of the play, she comments on scarf wearing and the associations it has gathered over time, particularly in the West. Immediately after reciting the poem, Sara begins describing a documentary she had watched on television where an innocent fourteen-year-old Jordanian girl was stoned to death for speaking with a man not her relative. Sara reacts with disgust, calling this act of killing "unbelievably barbaric and an awful" (29). In the third sequence of the play, the actress again changes costume to play the role of a more conservative middle-aged woman, Auntie Kariema, who also lives in Cape Town, and who is Sara's aunt. Auntie Kariema is in the kitchen making the Iftar (the meal Muslims eat in the evening to break their fast). The stage direction describes her as "loud, affectionate, warm and bigoted" (31). She engages an invisible Sara in a debate as she criticizes Azra for "breaking the rule" (31). She even condemns the youths of today who listen to and sing secular songs. A figure of conformism and traditionalism, she praises herself for not breaking the rules about talking to boys when she was Azra's age. As Marcia Blumberg observes, "Aunty Kariema is judgmental" (2011:26).

The fourth scene is introduced by hip-hop music which ushers in Ayesha, Sara's friend. The stage directions inform the reader of how Ayesha makes "black power salutes" and is "wearing a red Che Guevara T-shirt to show her activist nature". About Che she says, "he is my man, I am going to name my son Che" (34). She is described as a "self-professed Afro-Marxist feminist, who looks at the world through the lens of blended discourse theory that is all her own" (33-34). This introduction tells much about the free-spirited character who goes on to express her autonomy throughout the play. In addition with Che Guevara, her heroes include former Cuban president, Fidel Castro, African American Muslim minister and human right activist, Malcom X, African American movie director, Spike Lee, Karl Marx, South African anti-apartheid activist, Steve Biko, Indian feminist, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, Palestinian-American literary scholar, Edward Said, and African-American entertainer, Lauren Hill. As this list suggests, Ayesha's ideological stand is a blend of radical/left discourses, a potent cocktail of ideas. The action of this scene centers on Ayesha's condemnation of her friend's cousin Tahira for agreeing to take off her scarf at work because her boss demands it. And at the end of the play, Ayesha gives a performance of a poem entitled "Miss Islam" which I shall take time to unpack later in this chapter. Like Sara above, all other characters give their take on

honour killing and veiling in peculiar ways but these I shall highlight and explain as the study progresses.

The fifth scene sees Ayesha transform into Tahira Hussein, Sara's cousin who is married and works for Mr. Talbot, the owner of Talbot travel agency. She is described as "superficial and catty" (39). Her superficial nature is demonstrated in the fact that she wears a scarf to work but immediately she gets to her seat, she "hastily takes off her scarf and puts it in her bag" (39). During her monologue, she reveals that Mr. Talbot made her stop wearing her veil because, according to her boss, "customers don't feel comfortable buying plane tickets from [her because of her scarf] … and that she either takes off the scarf or go to work elsewhere" (42-43). According to Carol Kaplan, Tahira is "suddenly confronted with a deeply uncomfortable and disconcerting choice between her job and her religious observance. She chooses the latter and starts looking for alternative employment" (2005:726). As part of her monologue, she reveals that she later resigns when she discovers she is pregnant. By so doing, she sacrifices her hope of buying a house for her family and decides to move in with her mother in-law with whom she does not have a good relationship. Azra's mother is the sixth character in the play and the second character from the Jordanian setting. The play ends with her holding her daughter's dead body on her lap and regretting the day she was born. As she sits down on the bare floor crying, the play introduces an analepsis which details the travail and sadness she went through the day Azra was born because she was born a girl.

From this brief synoptic account which is given according to the successive stage appearances of the characters, it is evident that all four of the Cape Town-based characters, in different ways, speak to the different concerns of gender, race and religion in their society. These concerns are related not only to the Jordanian context where the killing of Azra takes place, but also to the wider transnational debate on Muslim women in patriarchal societies.

In her Masters' thesis titled *Perceptions of Empowerment: A study of Muslim Women Living in the Greater Cape Town Metropole*, Zulfa Abrahams notes:

> Though there has been research exploring the ways in which Muslim women have empowered themselves within patriarchal contexts, there still remain many questions around the ways in which Muslim South African women locate themselves and more so how Muslim women in Cape Town locate themselves when experiencing Islam. (2011:42)

Zulfa's comments declare the need to give scholarly attention to the lives of South African Muslim women and most specifically the ones from Cape Town. Because of its attention to the particular nexus of identity issues (such as race, culture, religion, geography and history) that characterize the experience of Cape Town Muslim women, this chapter offers a means of attending to Abrahams' challenge. As I will go on to argue, the play offers an important theorization of the position of South African Muslim women's experience about the religion they practice.

As suggested above, this one-woman play consists of different monologues by six female characters and a storyline which is woven around the fictional or imagined stoning to death of a Jordanian girl, Azra who, when she spoke to a man who was not her relative, was found to have broken the religious customs of Jordan, allegedly built around the Koran. As punishment for this religious abomination, she is stoned to death by men. This kind of killing is referred to as honour killing. In patriarchal societies, women are bound by a code of practice created and maintained by men. Speaking on how dominant groups tend to dictate and coordinate the lives of their subordinates, American scholar, Frank Rudy Cooper claims that a superior "social group will try to describe the world in a way that accounts for, but coordinates, the interests of other groups such that they will consent to a structuring of society that promotes the dominant group's interests" (Cooper 2002a: 859). The story of Azra's stoning alludes to the way in which the dominant social group – in this case, men - set limits not only on movement and expression but attempt to exert control over the body itself. As I hope to argue, the play presents a power play between dominant and subordinate groups from different perspectives: the power play between the dominant Muslim men over the women and the power play between the dominant western ideals and Islam. In the first instance, the patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexual behaviour portrayed through the killing of Azra is a way through which dominant men express their power over subordinated women. In the second instance, the power play is between the 'superior' western political and economic powers and the economically and politically weak 'third world'.

As argued above, *At Her Feet* has an unconventional structure as it comprises several linked scenes and employs the use of one character per episode. Using this style, various characters engage with their own experience of being Muslim in South African society. As such, the play effectively deconstructs the conventional dramatic structure of exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and finally resolution or denouncement. In other words, it does not consist of a story that develops

through the conventional structures of narrative plotting. Instead, it employs a series of episodes which are connected by one central act – the killing of Azra. As such, just like *Flight*, it draws on Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre. Writing on Brecht's epic theatre, theatre scholars, Oscar Brocket and Robert Ball observe that "rather than have one scene flow smoothly into another, Brecht call[s] attention to the knots tying the scenes together. Therefore, he used captions (projected on screens), songs, and other devices to emphasize breaks in action" (2004:186-187). In epic theater, Brecht deconstructs traditional acting styles through what he calls the Verfremdungseffekt or alienation effect. According to Brecht, the aim of "Verfremdungseffekt or alienation effect is to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident. No attempt is made to put the stage (and the audience) in a trance" (1964:136). These techniques include interjections such as characters speaking directly to the audience, the adoption of loosely connected scenes, the use of silence or inaction, on-stage costuming, and the use of a near empty stage and minimal props. In this way, Brecht sought to 'alienate' the audience by preventing them from immersing themselves emotionally in the play. Rather, he sought to engage their thinking and reasoning faculty, thus encouraging them to be critical of the actions that take place on stage in order to make positive changes in the society they live in. Davids espouses this theatrical method in different ways. The playwright alienates or distances the audience from emotional attachment through on-stage costuming, the use of minimal props, a near empty stage, poetry recitation, a fragmented plot structure and the adoption of a single character for all six roles. The play also employs a postmodernist rather than subjective dramatic style thus questioning dramatic conventions. According to American theatre authors, Oscar Brocket and Robert Ball, postmodernism in theatre "deliberately [breaks] down barriers between spectators and performance space … [and removes] distinctions between audience and performers" (2004:238). Ramen Sharma and Preety Chaudhary (2011) also observe that a postmodernist play offers "a combination of multiple genres to create a unique narrative or to comment on situations" (194). They also prove further that in postmodernist plays "fragmentation and non-linear narratives are central features" (196). The various methods of alienation devices encourage Davids' audience to question dominant social norms, thus prompting individuals to go beyond a stance of empathy and to take positive action against gender and race inequalities. The effect of the style adopted by Davids is that it gives the story/play a stop-start performance quality which also makes the synopsis of the play slightly challenging to narrate.

Islamic Feminism

Despite the irregularity in the plot structure, the play's varied concerns are refracted through the story of an 'honour killing', thus opening questions of gender inequality in Muslim society. Another incessant subject of the text is the question of veiling/scarfing or the use of hijab amongst Muslim women, a gender-related concern which also opens up questions of the racial stereotyping of Muslim men and women by the non-Muslim world, and particularly highlighting the discourse of post-9/11. Speaking in the Foreword to the play, South African poet and scholar, Gabeba Baderoon rightly observes that,

> the play is embedded in the details of Muslim women's lives … their relationships with one another, the intertwining of religion and ordinary life, the different calendars of the body, the mosque, the kitchen, funerals, childhood, marriage, friendship, politics, sin, transgression, shame, fear, war, solitude, history – these form the material of the characters' lives and of the play (10).

As is the case with the previous plays analysed in this study, *At Her Feet* gives an important place to the role of religion and culture as the agents through which women's subordination and abuse are achieved and maintained. Yerima's *Aetu* and *Abobaku* for instance, depict the ways in which the traditional Yoruba practices of marriage, property inheritance and required femininity are used to oppress Yoruba women. In Davids' play, the focus falls on Islamic religion. In the previous chapters, feminist theories such as African womanism, nego-feminism, motherism, liberal and radical feminisms were adoptedas theoretical frameworks upon which the plays are analysed. In this chapter, I extend this focus to include Islamic feminism which seems an appropriate theoretical lens given the particular concerns of this play. Islamic feminism or Muslim feminism as a theory which became popular in the 20th century is defined by Iranian-American, Nayereh Tohidi as:

> a negotiation with modernity, accepting modernity (which emerged first in the West) yet presenting an 'alternative' that is to look distinct and different from the West, Western modernism, and Western feminism. This is an attempt to 'nativize' or legitimize feminist demands in order to avoid being cast as a Western import. (2003:139)

She goes further to claim that:

> To educated women who want to reconcile the religious dimension of their identity with an empowered social status based on egalitarian gender relationships and freedom of

> choice in their personal, family, and socio-political life, Muslim feminism offers a mechanism to resist and challenge the sexist nature of the ongoing identity politics, particularly Islamism. (139)

For Margot Badran as a historian, Islamic feminism is a "feminist discourse and practice grounded in an Islamic paradigm" (2002:11). Badran builds on her initial definition of Islamic feminism by stating that Islamic feminism is a "discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur'an and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum" (cited in Barlan, 2004:1). In her contribution to Muslim or Islamic feminism, South African gender scholar, Aiasha Dadi Patel observes that "Muslim feminism … is a form of intersectional feminism [which] operates within the framework of religious constraints. It acknowledges that Muslim women have rights afforded to them by their religion, and supports their advocacy for justice and fulfilment of their rights against oppressive cultural and patriarchal dilutions of the faith" (2018:93).

From the definitions above, it can be deduced that Islamic feminism is a theoretical discourse that finds its root in between western secular feminism and patriarchal Islamic tenets. It is a concept that assesses both sides of the spaces – the western 'civilized' space and the patriarchal Islamic space. It does not completely embrace western feminism because of its obvious ideological disparities with the culture of Islam and it does not agree completely with some interpretations of the Koran which venerates men and demotes the position of women. In fact, in a more concise phrase, Islamic feminism is what Marcia Blumberg calls "the positioning of Muslim women within contexts of faith, feminisms, multiple marginalities and global politics" (2011:20).

Looking critically at this theory, it arises from the same set of concerns which prompted various forms of African feminism. For instance, both African womanist and Islamic feminist theories take issue with western feminism because of the tendency to universalize the experience of western women, nevertheless, there is agreement that African woman must be treated equally and oppression against her must stop. Both African womanism and Islamic feminism, therefore, are placed within the contextual paradigms of their respective religions and cultures. Islamic feminism in particular, an idea that gained prominence in the 1990s, a particularly rich debate has centered on the compatibility of Islam as a religion with feminism as a western concept. Some critics of Islamic feminism consider it oxymoronic in its terms and ideals: Iranian-Canadian gender scholar, Hiadeh Moghissi asks "how a religion based on gender hierarchy could be adopted as the

framework for struggle for gender democracy and women's equality?" (1999: 126). However, others claim that the two discourses could be seen as complimentary to each other. Writing to defend Islamic feminism, Nereyeh Tosidi argues that the

> overwhelming majority of women in Muslim societies are concerned with workable formulas in their daily battles against oppressive rule. To them, the argument that 'Islamic feminism is an oxymoron, hence useless,' may sound like secular arrogance or an irrelevant academic concern. (1998, 287)

In my view, just like other feminisms of African orientation such as African womanism, motherism, and nego-feminism, Islamic feminism needs both Islam and some western feminist ideals to achieve its aims. According to Tosidi these aims include: "to redefine, re-interpret, and reform Islam to be a more women-friendly and gender egalitarian religion. The goal is to enable women to 'turn the table' on Islamist authorities, to take Islamist men to task about what they preach and practice in the name of Islam" (139-140). Islamic feminism is particularly relevant to the discussion in this chapter given the concerns of the play with the way in which Islamic culture, beliefs, the Koran and Hadith (the reports on the sayings and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad) have been influential in determining how Muslim women are treated.

Muslim women have struggled in different ways against patriarchal Islam and these struggles have attracted interest and sparked debates all over the world. The recent case of Pakistani human rights activist, Malala Yousafzai, who survived a Taliban shooting in 2012 due to her advocacy for girl-child education in Pakistan, is one of many examples. Patriarchal (mis)interpretation and usage of the Koran has invariably placed Muslim women in a subordinate position. As indicated above, these issues take center stage in Davids' *At Her Feet*: first in the play's engagement with Islamic honour killing, second in the story of the young Auntie Kariema who is prevented from burying her mother because of her gender; and third, in the play's condemnation of western-style stereotypes based on Muslim female dress codes. The latter issue is an example of the play's negotiation of western feminism and its tendency to equate these dress codes with regressive femininity.

The play focuses on the experiences of Muslim women, paying particular attention to Muslim women in Cape Town, a cosmopolitan city in South Africa with a minority of 1.5% Muslims. Taking this as its subject matter, the play questions the perceptions of non-Muslims about Muslim men and women while still addressing the treatment of women by men within the same religious

and cultural setting. As in previous chapters, I begin my discussion of the play's negotiation of gender and patriarchy by considering some of the ways in which femininity (and masculinity) are defined. One especially prominent engagement with this question occurs at the end of the play when, after the killing of her daughter, Azra's mother holds her daughter's dead body:

> I am sitting here holding your head softly in my lap, near to the place I pushed you from years ago. And when I first saw you, covered in blood and out of my womb where I had kept you all those months, I reached out and I wept that you were born a girl. Not because I wanted a son. People often think that a mother's desire for a son is to please her husband. Not so. We don't want girls because we don't want our children to be prisoners to their own bodies. (64) (My emphasis).

As the last speech of the play, this definition of femininity carries enormous weight in the gender frame of things. Rather than experiencing pleasure at the birth of her child, Azra's mother weeps because her child is a girl. This is a child who will come to be judged by her gender and thus be made subservient. This is similar to Faramola's position in Yerima's play *Abobaku* where she regrets having been born a woman because both her existence and her death depend on her husband. Azra's mother weeps because of the world in which the girl child is born – a world controlled by men which confines women to particular gender roles. The reference to women's bodies as a form of imprisonment echoes argument made by French feminist Simone de Beauvoir who decries how women are made prisoners of their bodies and the ways in which the value of women's bodies is determined by men. Judith Butler "proposes that the female body ought to be the situation and instrumentality of women's freedom, not a defining and limiting essence" (1990:16). Azra's decision to violate the rules of gendered bodies which impose restrictions on freedom of movement and expression by speaking to a man she feels like speaking to leads to her death. Patriarchy, according to the play, is thus about controlling women's bodies. Writing on patriarchy and women's bodies, Solomon Robert and Kathleen Higgins observe that "the idea that women are more often presented as a part of nature than men comes in part from the idea that women are more closely identified with their bodies" (2013:321). From the play, patriarchy is a successful enterprise because it is able to "keep women down and use them for the men's own purposes" (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002:168). Unfortunately like many women, Azra's mother's fears come to pass as her daughter becomes of victim of her body. Azra's mother finds herself in the same position she was when she travailed over Azra, in a pool of blood. Azra's death is as a result of her search for freedom for her body. This search for freedom ultimately serves as the

catalyst of this whole narrative. The consequence of Azra attempt to take control of her body is exactly what Indian scholar, Ketu Katrak laments when she rightly observes that "women must pay severe costs for confronting tradition" (159).

For confronting the tradition which demands that a girl speaks only to men approved by their fathers, and refusing to be kept down "and used for the men's own purposes" (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002:168), Azra pays severely with her life. In this way, the play's concerns echo those of Yerima's plays which depict several acts of female resistance, albeit in more polemical ways. Azra's decision to speak with a man who is not her relative despite being aware that it is against the norms of the land echoes resistance on her part even though it leads to her death similar to the self-inflicted death Aetu subjects herself to.

Dishonouring Honour Killing

In her attention to the subject of honour killing, Davids adds her voice to a growing international condemnation of the practice. According to American lawyer and scholar, Ferris Nesheiwat,

> Honour crimes are acts of violence committed against a female by one or more of her family members mainly because of her alleged participation in unacceptable sexual behavior that results in the loss of the female's virginity, pregnancy or her participation in unacceptable social behavior such as socializing with males outside her immediate family (2004:253-254).

In another definition by Gökçe Yurdakula and Anna Korteweg, honour-based violence or honour killing is "defined as a family-initiated violent response to the perception that a woman has violated the honor of her family by crossing a boundary of sexual propriety" (2013:205). Phyllis Chesler, an American psychologist, reports that the United Nations Population Fund estimates that "5,000 women are killed each year for dishonoring their families" (2009:62). Terrence McCoy, who was reporting about Pakistan in 2014, recorded that as many as 1,000 women die in honor killings each year. While in Somalia, McCoy reports an incident of a particular Somali girl who was raped by three men who, when she reported the incident to the authorities, was accused of adultery, buried up to her neck inside a stadium and stoned to death before 1,000 people (McCoy, 2014). The practice has been widely condemned. After an international conference on honour killing held in Sweden in 2004, Phyllis Chesler reports that participants conclude the following:

> Violence in the name of honor must be combated as an obstacle to women's enjoyment of human rights. Interpretations of honor as strongly connected with female chastity must be challenged. It can never be accepted that customs, traditions, or religious considerations are invoked to avoid obligations to eradicate violence against women and girls, including violence in the name of honor. Violence against women must be addressed from a rights-based perspective … Measures should be taken in the areas of legislation, employment, education, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Respect for women's enjoyment of human rights is intrinsically linked to democracy. International conventions must be incorporated into national legislation. (2009:67)

According to an interview with Davids, the writing of this story was prompted by a television report of the stoning of a girl which was narrated to Davids by a friend. Although we do not have the details of the particular honour killing which is referred to, Davids' choice of Jordan as a country among many Islam-oriented countries could be because, as Indian legal expert explains, "the rate of this crime [in Jordan] is the highest in the world. Honour killing comprises approximately fifty-five percent of all documented crimes against women and one quarter of all homicides [in the country]" (Alka Bhatia 2012:7). I now turn to the question of how this practice is depicted in the play. It begins following way:

> My name is Azra. It means un-pierced pearl. It means that I am untouched. My name is for something pure and unsoiled. My name is Azra al Jamal, and I have just been killed. I have sat in the middle of a circle of forty men, and I have just been killed. I have felt my body break in different places, and pieces of my bones scrape through skin, because there have been eighty hands throwing countless rocks at me for some time now. I have felt my mouth bleed softly against sand, dry enough to make me choke, too thin for me to clutch. My name is Azra al Jamal and I have just been killed. Because I spoke to a man who was not my father/brother/uncle/cousin, and now my father/brother/uncle/cousin has taken rocks and flung them, knocked me unconscious, smashed my teeth, made me scream and beg and say "I didn't mean to," but I did mean to, and my intention doesn't matter now, because I have no honour. And I have no voice …. Anyone who walks by now can see what is happening to me. (25-26)

Azra's words present the events in the form of a tableaux as it offers a form of static depiction which serves as a window into the whole story the audience is about to watch. Azra's account above is similar to the biblical record of Mary Magdalene in John 8:11-11 who was accused of fornication by men consisting of Pharisees and teachers of religious law and was nearly stoned to death before being rescued by Jesus Christ. For Azra, there was no Jesus-like figure there to rescue her; all she had were men with big beards and boys throwing stones at those who attempted to

intervene. The interesting part of the biblical story is the fact that judgment is meted out only to the woman, as in Azra's story, the man with whom Mary Magdalene committed adultery was not judged. The man with whom Azra speaks is not even heard of. These incidents, which are thousands of years apart, continue to prove that women have always been the victims even when men are the offenders or co-offenders.

The extract addresses the subject of women's silence and sequel punishment for speaking. At the tender age of fourteen, Azra decides to resist the control that the cultural norms of Islamic patriarchy places on her by speaking to a man who was not her father/brother/uncle/cousin. As a result, her father/brother/uncle/cousin decide to kill her through a stoning process carried out by over forty male family members. The play suggests that women are required to keep their bodies to please their men. The play horns in on the issue of male attempts to control women's sexual lives which is linked to the idea that not only women's bodies, but women's sexuality must be under male control. Indian author, Ketu Katrak observes that "the ideals, ethics, and morality heaped on women since time immemorial are suffocating and killing … they have handcuffed us with modesty and chained our feet with loyalty, so that far from running, we have not been able even to walk" (2006:156). Katrak mentions loyalty and modesty as forms of handcuffs and restraints that are used to monitor, police and dictate women's lives. Azra asserts her chastity and spotlessness through the image of an un-pierced and untouched pearl; however, despite the fact that she had abided by the social requirements of modesty and loyalty, she is still found guilty and deemed worthy of murder. What this suggests is that the problem is not the demands that have been placed on women but the fact that they are women. In the Jordanian context specifically, social control is not only extended to the woman's body itself, it also linked to the need to control women's sexual behaviour. De Beauvoir observes this when she points out that women are condemned to "simply [be] what the man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as sexual being" (1949:16). The emphasis on women's sexual life is also noted by Turkish feminist lawyer, Canan Arin who when discussing honour killing in Turkey observes that "honour killing or customary murder are intended to control women's sexual life in the broadest sense" (2002:822). As Katrak also notes, there is a "struggle over what is tradition [and] a battle over the female body — how to control it and keep it familiar within recognizable and legitimized patriarchal codes" (2006:160). Therefore, apart from the claim that dishonour and shame are brought to the family through a woman's sexual transgression, the

ultimate motive seems to be that men require women's bodies to be kept in certain ways and when women fail to abide by these standards, they are punished, sometimes with their lives.

Azra's story suggests that the value placed on the life of a woman is dependent on her obedience or disobedience to men's dictates. She is a good and virtuous woman when she follows social norms but evil when she rejects these customs. Therefore, her life is defined by standards set by the society which is patriarchal. As Davids explains, "women are often made invisible or silent – other voices speak to them, at them, and for them" (2006:67). Women's lives are thus in the hands of men who can preserve and take these lives when they please. The play's emphasis on the fact that no less than forty men gathered together to carry out this act suggests that men find some sort of masculinist and hegemonic gratification and fulfilment in determining the fate of women.

The next scene sees Sara problematizing the practice oh honour killing. As Sara observes, "women [present at the stoning are] wailing [while] men are looking fierce behind big beards" (29). Young boys are tasked with the duty of "picking up rocks and hurling them at the cameras. You know how good Arabs are at throwing rocks" (29). Sara explains that she feels sick after watching the documentary and begins to have concerns for herself. She says, "I hate what happened to this girl in Jordan. And I hate what is going to happen to women who wear scarfs after watching this documentary. It happens all the time" (29). Her plight is understood in two ways. First, she condemns the vicious nature of her culture which condemns a woman to death because of her defiance of patriarchal orders. In this way, she aligns herself with the international censure of Islamic honour killing. Her second concern has to do with the response to the killing. Here, she questions the kinds of stereotypes that emanate from non-Muslims in relation to the honour killing they have seen on the television. The tone of Sara's speech indicates that she is afraid of social stereotyping: she fears that women who wear scarfs will be judged by non-Muslims who watch the documentary. This latter concern suggests that Muslim women are concerned about their deportment in terms of dressing and fear external condemnation. The contradiction between Sara's criticism of Islamic patriarchal violence and the way in which Muslim women are further condemned by non-Muslim world for submitting to what she considers barbaric practices suggest that Muslim women face a double condemnation both from Muslim men and from the non-Muslim world.

The question of women's resistance to patriarchal norms is a key concern of all the plays discussed in this thesis: in some cases, women characters are depicted as being able to offer resistance; at other times they must shut down emotionally and pretend to in order to survive; or, they simply succumb to oppression by weeping and wailing. In each case, women's choices are presented as the consequences of men actions or inaction. In *Little Drops* for example, Memekize devises a means of survival in the patriarchal world of Gbadamatu kingdom by acting like a man. In another example of emotional shutdown, Aetu in *Aetu* commits suicide, while, the women in *So What's New?* refuse to give their emotional affection to men. Sara's response to the practice of Islamic honour killing is one of open and outright condemnation. As such, her stance of resistance is contrasted with that of her Auntie Kariema who, as a figure of experience and tradition, holds on to the conservative tenets of her socio-cultural environment. When Sara visits her aunt, Auntie Kariema engages her in a semi-argumentative discussion via monologue. She is alone on stage, but she speaks as though Sara is there listening to her:

> So you want to be sad about this girl. You've been talking about her for twenty minutes now. And I have only this to say to you: there are always two sides. Barbaric? What's so barbaric? You telling me that this girl had no idea she was breaking the rules, running off to see that boy? So she breaks the rules and she must get away with it? Is that what you are saying? … That girl growed up her whole life in that village – whole life probably very happy … I am not saying she should have died, only Ya'Ala can make that choice. But do you think I went sneaking around to meet boys at your age? (31 & 33)

Auntie could be said to be complicit in honour killing because she assumes that she will be marred with the shame and dishonour that fellow women's 'shameful' demeanor can bring upon her. She therefore represents the position of someone who is immersed within a belief system and who cannot imagine anything beyond it. She accepts without question the oppressive rules propagated by men and thus supports the punishment for women who refuse to abide by them. That is why she argues that Azra deserves the punishment for "break[ing] the rules". As such, she is a gatekeeper of patriarchy using Connell's phrase. This is interesting because as we shall later discorver, she also fall victim of a different patriarchal rule. Men make the rules and make women live by them. Mexican-American feminist Gloria Anzaldúa notices this in her autobiographical work: *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987) where she notes that culture is made by those in power – men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. This is also similar to Frazer James' remark cited by de Beauvior that "men make gods and women worship them"

(1949:88). Auntie Kariema has been made to see the laws created by these men as gods and the only thing she does is bow to them like other 'credulous' women do.

Auntie Kariema's support of Azra's punishment rather than extend her camaraderie with her since they are both female 'other' alludes to what American feminist, Martha Nussbaum calls adaptive preferences. Serene Khader (2011) expands on the implications of Nussbaum's term:

> Women and other oppressed and deprived people sometimes collude with the forces that perpetuate injustice against them. Women's acceptance of their lesser claim on household resources like food, their positive attitudes toward clitoridectemy and infibulation, their acquiescence to violence at the hands of their husbands, and their sometimes fatalistic attitudes toward their own poverty or suffering are all examples of "adaptive preferences," wherein women participate in their own deprivation. (xii)

It is clear from Auntie Kariema's speech that she is to some extent participating in injustice against women of her kind. One could assume that the playwright's decision to give this role to the oldest character indicates that some women who have lived by traditional norms and customs for a long period of time do allow themselves to be agents of oppressive practices.

In juxtaposing the views of Auntie Kariema and Sara, the play seeks to engage with the complexities of social attitudes – as in Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of polyphony – thus giving voice to a range of ideologies and opinions which might be contradictory. However, the play also goes further by exploring some of the complexities in Kariema's position itself. As the scene progresses, Auntie Kariema remembers how she, like Azra, had also been a victim of patriarchy. She explains to Sara how, when she was a child, had been denied the right to bury her mother because of her gender even though she was the first-born. At this point, she comes to agree, along with Azra, that they were discriminated against because of their gender: "This Arab girl, I suppose I can understand her … I wanted to walk and she wanted to talk" (53). In this way, the play connects similar forms of discrimination meted out to women despite huge differences in context and age. In both cases, these women are denied the natural freedom to express the feelings they have for their loved ones. As discussed in previous chapters, stories of conformist women who later come to realise that they too have been victims of patriarchy are also in evidence in Yerima's plays in characters such as Mama, Faramola (*Abobaku*), and Memekize (*Little Drops*). Like Auntie Kariema in *At Her Feet*, their connivance with patriarchy and their status as accomplice begins to shift when they themselves understand their own victimization under patriarchy.

The play therefore contextualizes the Islamic faith and places it alongside western feminism with the aim of creating a more equal world for women; at the same time it does not dissociate itself from the teaching of the Koran upon which Islam as a religion is built. So, if Islamic feminism is what Blumberg calls it – the locating of Muslim women within contexts of faith, feminisms, multiple marginalities and global politics – then the concerns explored in *At Her Feet* are perfect examples of Islamic feminism. The play seeks to achieve the aims of Islamic feminism as recommended by Toshidi, which is to reform Islam to be a more women-friendly and gender egalitarian. In *At Her Feet*, honour killing in the name of Islam is outright, thus Davids aspires to a more-women friendly Islamic society.

"I don't want you looking at me the way you look at them": the veil/scarf/hijab in *At Her Feet*

As argued above, the play's engagement with honour killing can be seen as an internal attack by a Muslim playwright on patriarchal Islam. In this section, I go on to explore another dimension of the play's critique, one which is directed externally at western perceptions of Islam. As a Muslim herself, someone who has had experience of Muslim patriarchy, Davids adopts the complex position of an insider who critiques various aspects of her own culture while, at the same time, directing criticism at those who condemn Islam from without. This latter engagement is centered on the Muslin hijab or veil. Over the last two decades, there have been conscientious debate in the west, especially in the western media, about the ways in which Muslim women dress. These debates are carefully addressed in *At Her Feet*. Some of the questions or concerns raised in the play include the following: what does veil wearing mean to a Muslim woman? Is she forced into wearing it? Is this a form of religious oppression? Is it a form of religious piety? Why do Muslim women wear it? And what does the hijab mean to a Euro-American person? According to British cultural theorist, Robert Young, "depending on who you are, the veil symbolizes control or defiance, oppression or autonomy, patriarchy or non-western communal values" (2003:80). What is important here is that Young prioritises the importance of what Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith calls one's 'standpoint'. In other words, the veil takes on multiple meanings depending on

one's position and point of view. This instability in the definition or meaning of the veil is a central concern of *At Her Feet.*

Writing about the ambivalence of the veil, Young observes that "nothing symbolizes the differences between the western and the Muslim worlds more than the veil" (2003:80). Young's observation points to the difference in Muslim and Western socio-cultural beliefs where, in the west, it is seen as a fixed sign of oppression but seen differently among Muslims. Within Islam itself, there are debates about the relevance of veil-wearing and its association with women's oppression, suggesting also that the reasons for wearing the veil are not altogether homogenous (Ahmed 1992, Bullock 2000). According to American scholar, Sandra Hochel, veil wearing among Muslim women is done for different reasons and represents different signs: "to some it symbolizes piety; to others, oppression. To some it is a rejection of Western morality; to others, a rejection of modernity. To some, it is a religious statement supporting Islam as a way of living; to others, a political statement supporting violent Islamists" (2013:40). As noted earlier, the playwright makes this ambiguity a central concern of the play while, at the same time, giving attention to the particular responses to the veil from Western feminists who tend to see it as an unequivocal sign of oppression.

Before considering the depiction of veiling in *At Her Feet*, it would be useful to look at the practice in its historical context. The practice of veiling predates Islamic existence. Scholars such as Lois Beck and Nikki Keddie (1978), Guity Nashat, (1988), Leila Ahmed (1992) and Kahf Mohja (2008) explain that the practice of veiling and the seclusion of women is pre-Islamic and originates in non-Arabic Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies. According to Nikki Keddie, "the first reference to veiling is in an Assyrian legal text which dates from the thirteenth century BC, which restricted the practice to respectable women and forbade prostitutes from veiling" (1991: 3). What these historical records suggest is that veiling was symbolic of status and pedigree. Women with high status were the ones who wore veils. However, since the seventh century during the times of Prophet Muhammad who wrote the Islamic holy book, the Koran – as given to him by Allah – according to the Islamic beliefs, women were directed, even ordered, to wear the veil. The wearing of the veil for Muslim women is thus derived from Koranic direction. Koran chapter 24 vs. 31 for example, states that:

> And say to the believing woman that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what must ordinarily appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women or their servants who their right hand possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no senses of the shame of sex and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornament.
>
> O Prophet! Tell thy wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): this is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. (33:59)

What is suggested in these Koranic injunctions is that even though, from a contemporary perspective, some of the statements sound sexist (a woman lowering her gaze, guarding her modesty and not displaying her beauty), the chief aim is not to oppress women. Rather, the practice is aimed at preventing, or at least minimizing, lustful interest in and sexual violence against women. However, for many feminists – including some Islamic feminists such as Fadela Amara – the practice is reactionary. It is interesting to note that the Korannic reference to sons, husbands and brothers is very similar to the "father/brother/uncle/cousin" (25) referred to in David's play, suggesting a similar recognition of the patriarchal system. The implications of this intertextual engagement will be explored later in this chapter.

Responding to the debate about the proposed banning of scarf-wearing in France's public schools in an interview with Rose George of The Guardian International, Amara intensifies her perception or understanding of veil as oppressive by describing it as "the visible symbol of subjugation of women" (cited in Rose, 2006:n.p), and therefore should not be allowed in secular spaces of France's public schools (cited in Rose, 2006). For this writer, the Koranic order is oppressive and therefore must be abandoned. Other feminists, such as Canadian-Iranian anthropologist, Homa Hoodfar, see Muslim veiling in a different way. Wring in 1992 after having lived twenty years in Canada and Europe, she argues that "many assumptions about Muslim women were false, and were based on racism and biases of the colonial powers" (1992:5). Hoodfar's assertion is similar to that of Davids who, when speaking about her play, reacts to occidental viewpoints of Muslim women and argues that what is portrayed in the global media is not the same as the lives of Muslim women. It is because of the gap between representation and lived experience that she decided to write this play:

> Archaic, old, Orientalist images of Muslim women were being played out in the global media-portrayals. I thought [these] were often biased, outside perspectives that I felt very little connection with, and I was trying to create a genuine reflection of the world I had grown up in – which in itself was multifaceted, at once Muslim, African, Western. I focused on that particular group of people because it's the space that I was born into, it's what I know, and I wanted to deal with certain issues that were important to me: racism, sexism, tradition, modernity, religion, and I found the vehicles through a range of characters. (Davids, cited in Kaplan, 2005:721)

These and other arguments point to the global fallacy surrounding Muslim women which is centered on the Western benchmark against which specimens from the Global-South are measured. Writing about this unequal method of research, Marnia Lazreg laments that "social scientists often fail to compare like for like. The situation of the poor illiterate peasant women of the south is implicitly or explicitly compared with the experiences of upper-middle-class women of the western societies" (cited in Hoodfar, 1992:5). Lazreg argues that many western theorists arrive at erroneous conclusions when theorizing about the applicability of a principle conjectured somewhere in Europe about other parts of the world. The idea above is critically discoursed in Spivak's essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak argues that Euro-American intellectuals tend to impose a questionable and biased universal value system on the subaltern – a term she used to describe oppressed groups of people. To her, rather than acknowledging the values of the unique culture as valid, they are regarded as barbaric and therefore in need of correction. This has resulted in epistemic backlashes from non-western critics who waste no time in debunking this western discourse. What these discussions imply is that most western theorizing lacks empirical dimensions instead, arguments are derived from perceptions and assumptions which are then read as empirical data and used to define the lives of Muslim women.

Since the 9/11 incident in particular, Muslim women have had to bear the burden of a reductive stereotypical association with terrorism. Speaking about this, journalist and author, Myra Macdonald describes how the 9/11 event has paradoxically created "an apparent openness to a plurality of Muslim women's voices … but the opportunity this offered for diversity of perspectives was repeatedly undermined by the continuing obsession with veiling/unveiling" (2006:7). The implication is that while the incident opened up more space for Muslim women's voices, veiling continues to be problematized. Blumberg presents a similar argument when she argues that "veiling is a vital aspect of Islamic culture and has permeated societal customs on many

levels" (28). Extending the argument, Hoodfar suggests that the western obsession with the dress code of the Muslim woman is an example of Islamophobia. Davids also makes this clear when she argues that:

> the notion that Muslim women who choose to wear a scarf are somehow participating in retrogressive, self-imposed oppression is really reductive thinking... [T]he situation in France where people are being "rescued" from their own choices, or other people are being "shielded" from having to witness obvious displays of Islam is worrying because it speaks to an ingrained European Islamaphobia. (cited in Kaplan, 2005:727)

What the examples above suggest is that the life of a Muslim woman is often perceived from the standpoint point of the west which can be erroneous. This is clearly presented in Hoofar's assertion that "the static colonial image of the oppressed veiled woman thus often contrasts sharply with women's lived experience of veiling" (5). In the case of the debate about the veil, general ideas of fashion (and feminism) are still very much subjectively Eurocentric. Writing about the stereotype against veil wearing in the west, Lamkaddem Saroglou, et al (2009) record that psychologists in Belgium conducted a survey to ascertain whether the Western majority's concern about the Islamic veiling, and the support of its ban from the public sphere, is stirred by the defense of the values of autonomy and equality or by xenophobia/ethnic prejudice and by anti-religious sentiments. Consistently across two different studies, it was found that resentment against the veil was predicted on xenophobia or ethnic prejudice and general anti-religious sentimentalities and not by the defense of the liberal beliefs of autonomy and equality which most of them hypocritically claim to be interested in.

As suggested above, the ambivalence of the veil is a central subject of Davids' play, one which is introduced by the character, Sara Jacobs. Having expressed her dissatisfaction with honour killing, she proceeds to engage with the subject of veiling by means of another monologue:

> The world has gone a bit of veil crazy. Behind the veil. At the drop of a veil. To veil or not to veil. And I wonder sometimes why, with my love of fabric, and texture, colour and beauty, with my collection of scarves that I drape around my waist, or wrap like a bandana on my head, or loop through my belt holes, or throw around my shoulders I wonder if I don't wear it just because I don't like what it says. Or maybe it's because I don't want you looking at me like you look at them. (30)

Sara's ambivalence provides a window into the internal and external debate surrounding veiling in the play. While the first part of the statement addresses the debates and arguments that have

ensued in relation to veiling, the statement that follows speaks to Sara's personal dilemma with veiling. Despite her love for the scarf and the way the scarf beautifies her in many ways, she clearly refuses to wear it. Sara's contradicting perspective suggests that her internal desire is controlled by external and environmental circumstances. She makes this clear in a later statement when she explores the fear of being stereotyped and the psychological disturbance which veil-wearing Muslim women are exposed to. Sara does not want to be subjected to certain forms of judgments that other veil-wearing Muslim women must deal with. This form of stereotype is noted by Hoodfar who accurately argues that "all members of the Muslim community, and in particular veiled women, are suffering the psychological consequences of these views" (1992:5). These views referred to by Hoodfar are the views of oppression, abuse and voicelessness. Sara's dilemma in terms of her choice about veiling is seen to be dictated by the potential prejudices she might face. She indirectly dissociates herself from veil-wearing Muslim women by referring to these women as "them" because she does not like the way they are perceived. Her dissociation from scarfs that she loves and fellow Muslim women whom she refers to as "them" suggests a form of mental denial arising from her desire to avoid stereotypes.

Writing about the play and its exploration of the veil, South Africa academic, Nicola Cloete rightly observes that, "the veil [is the] starting point for discussions of feminism [and] useful both as the most visible icon of identity and, simultaneously, the most contested image within the narrative of the play" (2011:48). Cloete's observation is spot-on as the play explores veiling as an entrance into feminism – women's fight for gender equality. It also addresses the dynamism in veiling and how veiling has been used to define Muslim wearers. Sara's refusal to wear the veil to avoid an identity she hates, speaks to the subject of identity that Cloete has pointed out.

In the forward to the play, Gabeba Baderoon rightly observes that "knowing the intense scrutiny experienced by Muslim women who choose to wear a veil, the play declines to reveal the secrets of an authentic insider. Instead, the beauty and pleasure of scarves is explored" (12). A notable point in Baderoon's comment is the affirmation that the play omits certain aspects of veiling within Muslim women's communities, that there is more to veiling than Davids has revealed in the play. Baderoon seem to be insinuating that the play is opaque and, therefore, denies the reader or audience complete information about the concept of veiling; instead, the play presents the beautiful

and pleasurable aspects of veiling only. In this case, therefore, only those audience members or readers who are Muslims will understand what part of veiling is revealed or concealed.

The play's engagement with the veil takes another shape in the form of a poem, entitled, 'The Scarf', which engages with the concepts of the scarf and veiling extensively. In the very first scene of the play, the stage directions are as follows: "stage left is a plain wooden table and chair, stage right is a wooden stool, and a box with scarfs in it" (25). In this way, the readers and audience are alerted to the topic of the scarf, one which forms on ongoing preoccupation in the play as a whole. The box contains scarfs of different colours to portray the vibrant part of veiling which is seldom seen or appreciated by critics of the veil. The first thing Sara does is to recite the poem. The first stanza reads: "It begins with geometry/a square folded half/three-tiered naked edges/a shape now formed/neither here nor there/the legacy of Egypt/a dream for Pythagoras" (27). This stanza presents the aesthetic aspects of the scarf. For Sara, the scarf is so beautiful that she compares it to an aspect of science, namely geometry which deals with shapes and sizes. Here, the scarf is aligned with the legacy of the great Egyptian civilization and the dream of the great Greek philosopher, Pythagoras. In this way, Sara gives the scarf the status of a beautiful object and makes it a sign of a complex civilization.

In the second stanza, the scarf is described in paradoxical ways as "a silken noose/hung not-too-loose/and the binding of grace" (27). The reference to a noose implies bondage while "binding of grace" suggests beauty and elegance. Is Davids suggesting that the usage of the scarf is an ambiguous signifier in the gender and racial frame of things? How could a scarf be a noose and at the same time graceful? The ambiguity of the image could be seen as an affirmative statement about the ambiguity of the scarf itself; it could also be a reference to the many debates that have ensued about it. From the standpoint of the play, the practice of veiling is presented as multifaceted because of varying interpretations that are ascribed to it.

The last stanza of the poem presents the geographical origin of scarf and alludes to the Koranic suggestion of women's hair as an agent of seduction:

> Somewhere it began – perhaps with sand
> small-grained, deep-swept
> in deserts stretched bare

under the caress of the sun
where the hills shift and flow
with the ease of silk
It begins with hair – The tissue of seduction
streaming dead tendrils
that writhe with invitation. (28)

After presenting its aesthetic features both as an object itself and in relation to the beauty it gives to the head of a woman, the poem goes on to describe its protective function. Phrases such as, "sand, small-grained, deep-swept, in deserts stretch bare under the caress of the sun" present the common geographical feature of many parts of the Middle East where scarfing is most needful as a result of the weather. So, besides the beauty of the scarf, what the poem also suggests is that it functions as a form of protection, a covering from the heat and the dust. Also important is that it covers women's hair thereby suggesting the sexual danger it poses. Writing about the poem, Blumberg observes "the poem highlights the … linkage with hair, which is seductive and thus may or must be covered according to local tradition" (2006:26). It is pertinent to note that the role of hair as an agent of identity in terms of definitions of beauty and the question of race will be explored immediately after the analysis of the scarf. The poem combines these important topics, but I have separated them for this analysis given the attention they require.

Sara's monologue continues with a description of a cherished memory of her aunts wearing scarfs. Like many girls, she observes how her aunts, mothers and sisters wear scarfs "with a sense of colour and pleasure and pride" (29) and anticipates wearing scarves as an adult. This sense of pleasure and pride is precisely what Western feminists assume that Muslim women lack. Rather than considering veiling from the standpoint of aesthetics, personal choice and agency, many western veil critics judge wearers from their own political standpoints. Sara's statement about pride corroborates a participant's avowal in a study conducted by Zulfa Abrahams on women's experiences of veiling in Cape Town. One of Abraham's interviewees, Wisaal notes that she is "treated with more respect by men and women, Muslim and non-Muslims because she [is] dressed in hijab" (Wisaal in Zulfa, 2011:72). One of the reasons advanced by veil-wearing Muslim women like Wisaal is the respect with which they are treated when they have it on. However, not every woman is like Wisaal. As the play suggests, many – like Sara – bow to societal pressure and refuse

to wear the veil so that they will not be stigmatized. This fear of labelling is also stressed in different quarters by Louis Cainkar (2009), Basia Balek (2013) and Michelle Clarke (2015). Having explored the perspective of Sara on the discourse of veiling, the play shifts to the perspective of a rather more opinionated and confident character, Ayesha.

Described as an 'Afro-Marxist feminist' in the stage directions, Ayesha represents the learned and literate Muslim woman, who, unlike many Western feminists, does not see veiling as a symbol of oppression. Her choice to wears the veil does not stem from her obedience to the Koran but because she is respected for doing so: "I keep my head wrapped when I leave the house for respect" (36). It is not altogether clear what kind of respectability is implied here. It could refer to the fact that she is not subjected to an objectifying male gaze and thus not addressed solely in terms of her beauty. Another suggestion is that it could mean the respect gained on religious grounds, the respect given to someone who is compliant with the words of Allah. Because of her knowledge not only of the Koran but also of the stereotypes in the world she lives in, Ayesha's comment above suggests that her decision to wear a scarf is not based on the Koranic order but rather for the personal satisfaction she gets from it.

Ayesha narrates a story of what happened to her cousin's friend Tahira who stopped wearing the hijab to work because her boss found it unacceptable and not business-friendly. The boss claims that customers were refusing to patronize the travel agency where she worked because of her style of dress. She would have to do away with the scarf or be sacked immediately. Tahira, just like Sara represent Muslim woman who capitulates to Western pressure. Ayesha regards this as spinelessness: "I have academic reasons for wanting to smack her, [she] is a brand of human being that I seriously need to subvert. I mean Tahira stopped wearing a scarf to work because her boss told her to. So much for the conviction that she has to ram down everyone's throat" (35-36). As a character who espouses a Marxist-feminist position, it is intriguing to observe that Ayesha does not consider scarf wearing as a sign of complicity. Rather, she rejects the western position on veiling, an idea nurtured by her choice of equality and the freedom that comes from her knowledge of the ideologies of the different scholars and activists mentioned earlier. Her decision to combine the ideas of western feminism with Koranic prescriptions about female veil-wearing suggest that, as well as having the identity as an Afro-Marxist feminist, Ayesha can also be an Islamic feminist. In the responses of Tahira, Sara and Ayesha to the western criticism of veiling, we see two

psychological reactions. Those of Tahira and Sara, includes those who succumb to western pressure to abandon their veil due to corporate pressure or the desire to be free from judgment. The second, seen in Ayesha, represents those who are radical, self-assured and unintimidated by anyone or any form of prejudice.

In conclusion, the play shows how the perceptions of non-Muslims in the west – especially since the events of the 9/11 – can be seen as having both psychological and economic effects on Muslim women who chose to wear the veil. Likewise, Ayesha's confidence and her judgment of Tahira and other women who have been made to abandon their beliefs because of societal prejudices, represent one of the ways in which the play addresses the internal scrutiny among Muslim women themselves. The play contests the western belief that veil-wearing is a sign of submission to patriarchy. Instead, it emphasises its aesthetic aspects, the way in which it encourages respect and marks the wearers as pious. Also important are the many ways in which the veil could be seen not as a static sign but dynamic in its connotations. This is specifically noted by Hoodfar who write that while "for the westerners, [the scarf's] meaning has been static and unchanging, in Muslim cultures, the veil's functions and social significance have varied tremendously" (1992:5). Drawing on different historical events with regards to veiling in places such as Algeria and Morocco as examples of the changing image of veiling (see Fanon 1994), Hoodfar condemns the static western image of the veiled Muslim women. Hoodfar's view is also shared by Young who argues that "when people [especially westerners] talk about the 'veil', they often end up talking about it as if it were a fixed thing" (85). These scholars, like Davids, assert the fluid nature of veiling as against the static image that the western critics has assigned to it.

"I can't take you home because of your goddam hair": Politicizing Hair

It is imperative to explore the political significance of hair in Sara's poem and the play as a whole not only for its relevance to the depiction of Islam but also for its links to contemporary discourse of intersectionality. As the play suggests, the subject of hair cannot be discussed without exploring its links with race. Gender and race are used to explore the conceptual ideals of intersectionality in the play.

According to American writer, Cynthia Robinson, "the connection of hair to beauty intersects with race" (2011:358). Through racial and gender binoculars, human hair has been politicized so much in the twenty-first century that it has become relevant as another means of defining human identity. White human hair has often been used as a definition of good hair. The racial and political modalities of hair especially among the black race has been identified by Zimitri Erasmus who observes that "black hair is politicised by class and gender. It is also racialised" (1997:12). Erasmus' comment portends that black hair has been twisted or redefined and identified as another way of casting differences and justifying segregation both in terms of race and gender. She clarifies this further as she contextualises the common feature among the 'coloured people' (Erasmus 1997, Wicomb 1998) of South Africa. She notes that at the news of a child's birth, the questions mostly asked after congratulatory remarks are "is it a boy?, and the hair?" (12). The latter question is asked in order to determine if the child has 'good' or 'bad' hair. According to African-American Neal Lester (1999), the popular perception of "good" hair is hair that is closest to what looks like white people's hair. This is hair that commonly fits the criteria of "long, straight, silky, manageable, healthy and shiny" (175). In a similar argument, Mercer, writes that "where race structures social relations of power, hair – as visible as skin colour, but also the most tangible sign of racial difference – takes on another forcefully symbolic dimension" (35). Similar concerns are evident in *At Her Feet*. Auntie Kariema's prejudices are referred to by her son who acknowledges that his bigoted mother will not accommodate Ayesha, his girlfriend, because of her curly or wavy hair. This may suggest that Ayesha's race might not be entirely the same race as Nazeem's. Auntie Kariema who identifies herself as Malay may find Ayesha, a woman who is presented as coloured and therefore arguably closer to 'Bushmen' unacceptable to her family. Ayesha narrates an awkward incident which causes her to break her relationship with her boyfriend Nazeem, Auntie Kariema's son. Nazeem has been avoiding taking his girlfriend home for a long time until she gets frustrated and asks him why:

> So we're dating, going out … I suddenly realise that he's avoiding taking me home. He is avoiding introducing me to his mother. … Just tell me what is it … are you ashamed of me? I keep nagging, why why, why, tell me! … And he shouts back, you're right, I can't take you home because of your goddam hair is so kroes that my mother will think you're a boesman, and never that you're Muslim. (37-38)

Ayesha claims that her body was hurt by the "emotional rocks thrown at it" (38), the discrimination she experienced because of her hair. The concept of shame that Ayesha ascribes to her feeling is

an indication of the play's invocation of the divisions that exists even internally among coloured South Africans. It is intriguing how the play is able to discover how racism exists even within a group defined as one 'race'. Because of the difference in the straightness of the hair, these young lovers find ways of discovering the differences that exist between them. Due to the 'kroes' (curly) nature of Ayesha's hair which presents her as 'blacker' or 'less white', Nazeem feels his mother will find Ayesha unacceptable. Nazeem's statement not only 'throws rocks' at Ayesha, it indirectly refers to the black race as Bushman because of their identifiable curly hair. This suggests that, for Indians and Indian Malays who are all the characters in the play, the black man is considered a Bushman not because of his colour this time, but because of his hair. Ayesha determines to find a solution:

> So the next day, I went out and bought a wig. Yes, a long wig, kak cool, designed for Rapunzel. I called him, and he had promised, so he took me home. I had tea with a stunned Auntie Kariema, with my blonde wig that defied description eating her pies … and an hour later, with Nazeem still chewing his lip into a blood clot, I ceremoniously broke up with him declining the lift he offered". (38-39)

As a form of protest against racial discrimination, Ayesha breaks up with her boyfriend and decides to go home despite the fact that it is raining. She refuses to straighten her hair by using chemicals and conforming to what Zimitri Erasmus (1997) describes as "colonial-racist notions of beauty" (14). Ayesha's choice of blonde wig alludes to what Lester acknowledges above, thus playing with the prejudices of her audience. Cynthia Robinson condemns this form of discrimination by stating that, "hair valuations are bad for … females because they elevate White beauty standards and devalue hair textures common among Black females" (2011:358). Auntie Kariema who has already been established as bigoted is used once again as a character who epitomises this racist tendency.

Another part of the play that explores the question of hair is found in the poem Sara performs at the beginning of the play. Sara links beauty and attraction to hair. The second and the third stanzas of her poem focuses on the function to the hair: "It begins with hair – The tissue of seduction/streaming dead tendrils/that writhe with invitation" (27). The phrase 'tissue of seduction' suggests that hair has the sexual power to entice an admirer. If curly hair is linked to the 'boesman', it is no wonder Nazeem suspects that his mother would be turned off by his girlfriend's hair. In the poem, hair is sexualized with words such as 'seduction', 'writhe' and

'invitation'. The implication of such sexualization is that a woman's hair among other features of women is often used to determine her seductive power. In popular media, woman's hair is constantly used in adverts to entice and seduce men. This also is what Sara alludes to in the poem that has just been explored.

Sisterhood, Solidarity and the Politicization of the Middle East Crisis

In the final section of my analysis of gender and patriarchy in *At Her Feet*, I explore the question of female solidarity and sisterhood. In addition, I examine how the play addresses the US-Middle East relations, in particular, the US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and how, rather than pursuing peace, the US politicizes these crises in order to benefit economically.

As a matter of fact, just like feminism as a concept, sisterhood has its peculiarities. I can imagine that women in Global South countries are more likely to claim solidarity with women from the same part of the world rather than with women from the west. This has to do with their peculiar concerns such as race, culture, economic status, religion and the fact that they were victims of western colonialism. Black feminist scholar, bell hooks, echoes this view when she asserts that women are enriched when [they] bond with one another but [they] cannot develop sustaining ties or political solidarity using the model of Sisterhood created by bourgeois women's liberationists (hooks, 1984). Hooks declares that black women's solidarity arises from a shared social status. Speaking also of the sisterhood concept in the African context, Nigerian gender scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi asks, "are all sisters equal?", thus pointing to the inequalities that exist amongst women. She answers her question by stating that rather than sisterhood, what is expedient amongst women of different statuses is "sisterarchy" (Oyewumi, 2003). Sisterarchy is coined from sister and patriarchy. This suggests that, as in patriarchy, some women find themselves in the position where they are oppressed by other women. Both hooks and Oyewumi place emphasis on the inequality that exists between women who are privileged because of their race - the colonizers and women of colour - victims of colonialism. *At Her Feet* is a play that expounds on the theoretical nuances of sisterhood with attention to the oppressed women who have become victims first because of their gender, and secondly, because of their race, religion and social status.

When Sara recounts the experience of watching the television report of Azra's stoning, she identifies closely with Azra, the victim, since they share the same faith. Sara says "it took [her] a few moment before she realized it was the same [culture] she was born into. It was quite a shock …. This girl was about [her] age" (28). Because she is a Muslim and the killing of Azra is supported by Koranic injunction, Sara understands in a shocking way that she too could be a victim if not for the society she lives in, South Africa. She puts herself in the world of the girl which assists her in understanding the pain the girl went through. Speaking of this religious relation, Baderoon rightly notes that *At Her Feet* "juxtaposes different women who have the same name attached to them – that of Islam. It pushes them next to one another, inside one another's assumptions and prejudices" (9). Sara's understanding and identification with Azra is a way of claiming solidarity with her. Sara's response suggests that the geographical gap that exists between these characters has been closed through their shared faith, gender and age.

Solidarity and sisterhood are also exemplified through Auntie Kariema. Initially, this character is presented as bigoted and lacking in sympathy for Azra. In particular, she condemns Azra for flouting the patriarchal rule that restricts her from speaking with a man not her family member and argues that she deserves a form of punishment. However, later in the play, we see that she associates the discrimination against her with that of the little girl (Azra) when she says, "so this girl, this Arab girl. I suppose I can understand her … I wanted to walk and she wanted to talk" (53). Through her monologue, Antie Kariema recounts how she was prevented from burying her mother – an act that hinges on patriarchal customs. She was prevented from burying her mother while Azra is prevented from speaking to a man. Freedom of movement for Auntie Kariema is prevented while Azra's freedom of speech is denied. These women are forced to both inaction and silence. However, Auntie Kariema's earlier view of unquestioned acceptance to patriarchy changes once she acknowledges her own suffering under these rules. Her recognition of and association with women's suffering shows that, again, despite the geographical gap between them, they share a similar experience of victimhood. Furthermore, while Sara and Azra are of similar age, Auntie Kariema is old enough to be their mother. This shows that irrespective of age, distance and status also exemplified in *Little Drops*, women are victims of patriarchy. In this way, the play draws these connections and establish links.

I engage the last poem in the play to examine the subject of solidarity and the western politicization of Middle East crises. The poem entitled 'Ms. Islam' is performed by Ayesha. It is a twelve-stanza poem but only seven of these stanzas will be explored as these are the ones that address the subjects of solidarity and political manipulation of the Middle East crisis. Ayesha, whose name is the same as the first wife of the founder of Islamic religion, Prophet Muhammad is used to address the concerns observed through her poem. This is odd because the Koranic Ayesha was a stanch supporter of the Koran which Muslims believe was revealed verbally to Mohammad by God. So, using the character Ayesha to condemn some of the tenets of the Koran suggests that the playwright aims to speak directly for and to Muslim women against their oppression using an important figure in the Koran. Before Ayesha begins her exploration of the oppressive lives of women around the world and her unanimity with them, she opens her poem with an honourable admiration of Ayesha, the wife of Prophet Muhammad. In this poem, Ayesha praises the Prophet's wife for her exploits, knowledge and might all through her life. The implication of using the Koranic Ayesha as a point of reference to other women in the poem, encouraging them to overcome Islamic patriarchal ideals which limit them to domestic and maternal duties. Rather, the poem suggests, they should take a cue from Ayesha the prophet's wife who becomes an active scholar, warrior, poet and interpreter of the Shari'ah law.

In the fourth stanza of the poem from where the topic of solidarity begins, the poet establishes her solidarity with oppressed women all over the world – people she classified as her "global Ummah sisters" (60). She gives special attention to those in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, Nigeria and South Africa and concludes the poem by giving a compassionate closing remark. This first part of the poem encourages the Ummah sisters to be active and independent. The poem begins its solidarity message with Muslim women worldwide by introducing the audience to her "global Ummah sisters who live in … whispers" (62). Ummah is an Arabic word which means community of Muslim who are bound together by their Islamic beliefs. So, the poem looks for homogeneity in their oppression, a result of their gender as a denominating factor amongst these women. They are put together in a unified space irrespective of their geographical and age gaps as well as through their shared silence or voicelessness. From the second to the last stanza, one unifying gender oppressive element that interlinks all of them is the issue of religio-cultural norms that empower the male gender to the detriment of the female. Countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine have high numbers of honour killings which is why they are mentioned in the poem. In Nigeria

however, where Shari'ah law was introduced in the year 2000, there are no records of executed victims of honour killing. In the second stanza, the poet introduces the audience to the crisis that has been going on in Afghanistan.

In the stanza that follows, the poem begins its attention to women in selected Islamic countries. Starting with the oppressed Afghan women, Ayesha condemns the physical beating of her "sisters in Afghanistan [who are] dodging beatings from Taliban, trying to make sense of a US Marshall who thinks it's OK to drop a bomb and then a food parcel" (62). The first part of this verse addresses that physical form of gender violence that Afghan women go through at the hands of Taliban who are men, exercising their masculine prowess. The women not only suffer internal patriarchy, they also endure psychological trauma as they struggle to understand the intervention of the United States army and their 'get bombed-and-get fed' mediation tactics. Ayesha sees the US involvement in the on-going Afghanistan crisis as equally, if not more, harmful to the citizens as the original crisis. Speaking about the poem and its exploration of the US operation in Afghanistan, Blumberg asserts that the poem offers a "critique of the United States for its imperialistic operations and the double standard that lets it rationalize the dropping of bombs and at the same time act as the 'heroic' dispensers of aid to the very same people of Afghanistan" (2011:33). Blumberg claims that America continues to extend imperialism on victim countries by employing different tactics amongst which is 'divide and rule'. They aggravate the crisis in Afghanistan and then extend their powers there in order to gain economic and political control of the country.

The poem continues to explore female solidarity as well as the condemnation of the US politicization of the dire situations in countries experiencing serious political violence, this time by focusing on Iraq. Ayesha refers to the women in this part of the world as "my sisters in Baghdad, Basra, Iraq, baby girl lying dead, dummy still in her mouth, oil is burning, tenders made, they say they rebuild a nation, this looks like occupation not liberation" (62). Like the previous verse, the poem addresses the persecution women face in these Islamic countries but, this time, the effect of violent masculinity is seen on a little girl child. As such, the playwright observes that even infants and toddlers have become victims of the violent activities of men. As in the previous verse. The second section of the verse further amplifies Ayesha's understanding of US military service in Baghdad as selfish and a form of fortune hunting. Therefore, their purpose of going to

conflict-ridden regions like Afghanistan is not to bring liberation to the oppressed civilian but rather to facilitate US occupation in order to make gains from the losses of another nation. The fact that oil is mentioned alongside tenders, suggests that the poet sees the US as only interested in the oil that is abundant in Iraq since they are considered one of the world's largest countries with proven oil reserve. Consequently, rather than "rebuilding a nation", the US is building its nation from the resources accrued from other broken nations. Blumberg calls the damage done on these countries, "collateral damage" (33). As a counteraction to the US exploitation in these countries, their militias fight back. However, the victims are always women and children. They are the metaphoric grass which suffers when two elephants are engaged in a fight.

Continuing in the same vein, the next stanza switches to Palestine, one of the countries in the Middle East with a high rate of honour killing. In this stanza, Ayesha directs her solidarity to her "sisters in Palestine, in the camp doing prison time", an experience she refers to as a "nightmare" (62). The reason for the jail terms these women serve in Jenin is not mentioned in the poem, but one could assume that these are the women who have been accused of flouting one patriarchal custom or the other. The fourth stanza of this poem is unique in the sense that the attention shifts to a single female person. In the previous three verses and the verse that comes after this, 'women' as a plural word is used consistently. But in this stanza, Ayesha speaks only of a woman who is "facing death from the Shari'ah" in Nigeria. Since the introduction of Shari'ah law in the Muslim-dominated northern part of Nigeria in 2000, only two incidents of attempted honour killings have been reported. However, because of various national and international public interventions, none of these sharia proclamations of honour killing were successful. The first one was that of Safiya Hussaini who was condemned to death by the Sokoto Sharia court for adultery in 2002. The court's declaration was nullified after many appeals and various national and international interventions. However, the case that Davids refers to in the stanza is that of Amina Lawal of Katsina state of northern Nigeria, who in 2002 was sentenced to death by stoning for adultery. After years of appeals and various interventions, the sentence was overturned, and Amina was set free. Because Amina's offence according to Sharia law is similar to that of Azra in the play, the playwright draws attention to African examples of this practice. Honour killings are rare in Nigeria in comparison to countries like Iraq or Afghanistan because of the hetero-religious nature of the country. The population of Christians to Muslim is almost the same in Nigeria; therefore, if an honour killing

has occurred, it would mean that Christians have kept quiet or become complicit and this is rarely the case.

In the penultimate verse, the poem brings attention to women "in Cape Town's past … Saartjie … and Cissie Gool, Muslim women who redefined rules and [women] in the frontline of the UDF … know that I make it my business not to forget you" (63). The speaker draws attention to the abusive racial mistreatment of Sara Baartman also known as Saartjie in the nineteenth century; she also makes reference to the 20th century political exploits of Zainunnisa Gool also known as Cissie Gool and women such as Albertina Sisulu who were in the forefront of the anti-apartheid organization (United Democratic Front). Baartman's abuse has been researched and documented by scholars and filmmakers. The woman from the Cape colony was shipped to the UK where, she was put on display and then later taken to France. Baartman died in 1815 of an unspecified ailment at the age of 26. Welsh geneticist, Steve Jones recorded that "Saartje's hands [were] covered by the marks of the smallpox that killed her" (1997:204). However, in 2002, after almost two hundred years of her death, her relics were finally sent back to her birthplace, the Gamtoos Valley. She was buried on the 9th of August on the Vergaderingskop, a hill in the town of Hankey after more than two-hundred years after her birth (See Wicomb 1998, Zola 1998, Qureshi 2004, Scully & Crais 2008, Henderson 2014). The introduction of Baartman in this poem can be seen as the continuation of western imperialism on people and countries in the Global South. The poem not only addresses the present suffering of women, it also references oppressed women in history.

After declaring her sisterhood with oppressed women in the Middle East, Nigeria as well as South Africa, Ayesha makes mention of Cissie Gool who represents a female heroic figure in the South African context. The inclusion of Cissie Gool in a group of women defined by their suffering has a similar function to that of Ayesha, Muhammad's wife. In both cases, the playwright acknowledges the possibility of women's transcendence of patriarchy stricture and their ability to achieve heroic status in their own societies. According to Blumberg, Gool was "a twentieth-century lawyer and political activist who vigorously opposed the apartheid system and patriarchal injustice" (33-34). Born in Cape Town to a medical doctor and politically informed father, Gool grew up to become one of the first 'coloured' women to assume a respectable level of political height in the Cape. For a long time between 1940s and late 1950s, Gool worked in the South African local government, becoming the first black woman to do so. Davids' interest in Gool's

example is also evident in the fact that she has also written a biographical play on Gool's life published in 2009. The brief reference to Gool is meant to suggest her status, even though of a minority race, as one of South Africa's anti-apartheid heroines.

Despite these images of female heroism, the poem seems to finish on a rather pessimistic note by claiming that the road to female freedom "has not yet been built" (63). The poet concludes by reassuring the oppressed women both of history and of the present, of her solidarity with them by claiming that she will not forget while she continues her feminist struggles. From the perspective of the play, I am bound to agree with her rather underwhelming and melancholic conclusion. Women still struggle to get equal recognition as men. This resolution is a perfect illustration of what Brecht espouses in his alienation effect theory where he claims that the problems raised in plays should not necessarily be solved at the end of it. Rather the audience is encouraged to be active and responsible for creating or fashioning solutions to social problems that the theatre raises.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how gender, gender oppression and patriarchy are negotiated in Davids' *At Her Feet*, a play which draws on Brechtian and postmodernist theatrical techniques as a means of 'awakening' its audience. In particular, the chapter explores the play's engagement with contemporary socio-religious concerns such as honour killing, veiling, female solidarity and the politics of hair, with specific attention to Islam. What is particularly striking about the play's engagement with gender is the way in which it intersects with other questions such as race, politics, economics, social class and ideology. Nicola Cleote notes this by stating that play "recognizes the complexity of gender and race, and their evocative merging in a climate that seeks to neutralise and negate them" (2011:45). Still speaking about the play, Cleote observes that, "the agency and negotiated processes that feminist perspectives offer the characters are not simply confined to their experience of gender; they are similarly apparent in the construction and negotiation of their racial and cultural identities" (49). What the play explores is that Muslim women are faced with oppression from two different sides: first, patriarchy from within their religion and cultural space (through concerns such as honour killing, denial of burial privileges and discrimination based on hair texture) and second, within the broader context of US aggression and the legacy of colonialism

and external discrimination based on race. This means that both internally and externally, these women are faced with abuse and discrimination. This precarious situation puts the Muslim woman in a position of double jeopardy, a concept introduced in the early 1970's to demonstrate double discrimination based on racism and sexism (Frances Beale, 1979) or what Gloria Anzaldua calls the new Mestiza (1987). In David's play, gender is therefore not abstracted from the broader social and political world of human identity, discourse, social stratification and power.

In the play, the position of gender inequality addressed in relation to Muslim women is approached from a rather wider or transnational perspective as it speaks to Muslims all around the world compared to the more specific Yoruba culture explored in Yerima's plays. Marcia Blumberg makes this point clear when she observes that the play "examines … the competing conceptions of Muslim women's identity marked both by patriarchal religious fundamentalism and by western anti-Islamicism, and, more specifically, of a South African woman's identity, re-configuring itself within a changed national conversation about race, gender and religion" (2011:21). This does not imply that Yerima's plays do not treat global concerns such as rape, the effects of war on women and children or ecofeminism but rather that they do so by exploring these issues within the context of Yoruba culture. An identical concern throughout this play and those of Yerima is violent masculinity which is repeatedly condemned.

Lastly, the play's exploration of Islamic feminism through strong female Muslim figures such as the Koranic Ayesha, wife of Prophet Muhammad, the young, active and agile Afro-Marxist feminist Ayesha as active anti-oppression agents suggest that the play articulates sympathy with the perspective of western feminism which condemns all forms of abuse against women such as the critique of honour killing, patriarchal control of women's bodies and sexuality that are articulated in this play. Conversely, in an attempt not to empower western feminism at the expense of the tenets of Islam, the play explores the benefits of veil wearing and other aspects of the life of Muslim women such as the love and communality that exists among them especially during Ramadan and Eid al-Fatir. In placing the play within a feminist context, Davids offers a strategic engagement with the concerns of Muslim women all around the world as she attempts to forge a blend of both western and Islamic feminist positions. Finally, the play is able to further criticize western imperialism of victim countries and discourses ongoing racism which is a global problem.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION/THEORISATION

In this section, I offer some concluding remarks on the subject of gender derived from my analysis of my chosen plays. Further than the perusal of the gender-related concerns highlighted in the plays, this section also undertakes a reading of the plays as sites of theory-making in their own rights, thus seeking also to elucidate the kinds of feminist/womanist engagements which are offered in these texts. According to Judith Butler, "the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms" (1990:1). My reading of the plays concurs with this view: given the complexities and ambiguities in the ways in which gender concerns are represented in the various texts chosen for this study, it is important that the subject of patriarchy, womanhood and resistance be understood as fluid and unfixed and therefore best approached in individual terms, on a case-by-case basis. Since theories are a set of analytical tools used for the explanation, understanding and interpretation of certain questions, this study attempts to advance or recommend an alternative way of feminist theorizing through the reading of literary texts. According to American sociologist Gabriel Abend, "a theory is an explanation of a particular social phenomenon" (2008:178). It is formed from the results of careful observation, investigation, experimentation and sometimes, guess work. Theories are used to explain and understand varying aspects or subjects of both human and non-human entities (McMurray, Foster 1955, Thomas, Gary 2007). The importance of theory and its application in intellectual inquiry cannot be overemphasized.

According to Nigerian writer Obioma Nnaemeka, "theory plays a central role in helping to scrutinize, decipher, and name the everyday, even as the practice of everyday informs theory making" (2004:358). Various theoretical frameworks have been engaged in the course of this study. These include the ideological perspectives of western feminism, various Afrocentric gender perspectives as examples of postcolonial feminist theorising. As stated in the introduction to this thesis, one of the questions asked is: to what extent can these plays be seen as offering a theory of gender? It is obvious that this research undertakes a literary exploration of various textual representation of human experience, especially those of women. It has also assumed that drama, as a literary genre - arguably the most effective and impactful form of art - makes the texts even more engaging in comparison to other works of fictions such as poetry and prose which are not oriented towards public performance. Also important is that the analytical basis of this study are not the social phenomena themselves, as Gabriel Abend describes it. Rather, they are creative

literary works which nevertheless can be seen as offering an important basis for the discussion of the lives of Black women and men in Africa, following Albert Camus' assertion that fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth. Writing about the importance of literary texts in discussing the lives of African women, South African scholar Pumla Gqola rightly observes that "representations in creative texts are seen as enriching the variety of possibilities for Blackwomen's theories in Africa" (2001: 11). Pumla's observation, therefore, validates the inquiry undertaken here. The importance of these twofold studies (consisting of creative texts used in this study and the gender theories), helps to balance the method of investigation and authenticate the theory as it balances the required ingredient necessary for this section of theorisation. Writing on the need to balance theory with data, Austin Harrington posits that:

> If research consisted only of theories, it would lack reference to the real world … If research consisted only of data collection, it would lack all order and sense. If research consisted only of heaps of information, it would be no more than a chaotic bundle of statements, impossible to decipher or evaluate or to apply to any meaningful purpose. It would be useless and pointless (2005:5).

To therefore relate my research to the real world, keep it in order and sense, and to make it sensible and easy to decipher, this section attempts to see the possibility of formulating a theory. I must state here that the aim of this section is not to declare a gendered theoretical framework by which literary texts must be engaged or scrutinized, however, it offers an objective inference or conclusion and recommendation of the result of this research. In clearer terms, it posits a similar remark to that of Butler in her preface to her famous book, *Gender Trouble* (1999) where she declares that "the point of [the book] was not to prescribe a new gendered way of life that might then serve as a model for readers of the text. Rather, the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realized" (1999: viii). In this same light, the aim of this section is to open up a different and alternative way through which literary play texts can possibly be addressed from a gender or feminist perspective.

Having stated briefly the importance of theory in helping to analyse various content and context of human studies, I must note that in the field of philosophy, literature, gender, and other social sciences, the unending quest for theory making or formulation has been criticized repeatedly. In the field of literary studies for instance, the volume of feminist theories have met with varying antagonisms from different scholastic angles. African-American feminist and author, Barbara

Christian criticizes many feminist literary theorists of the last century for their "race for theory" (1995:459) and fame. She "feels that the … emphasis on … theory is as hegemonic as the world which it attacks … [T]he language it creates [is] one which mystifies rather than clarifies our [human] condition" (1995:459). Christian's view is buttressed by Nnaemaka who states that "above all, theory should be used to elucidate, not to obfuscate and intimidate" (2003:363). American philosopher and feminist, Martha Nussbaum also opines that as scholars and theorists, "we need to ask whether the framework we propose, if a single universal one, is sufficiently flexible to enable us to do justice to human variety we find" (2000:40). Still writing in this vein of theorizing within gender and feminism studies, America literary scholar, Barbara Epstein expresses her displeasure in the way therorisation has been politicalised:

> I am also dismayed by the subculture that developed around feminist poststructuralists and the intellectual world with which it intersects. In this arena, the pursuit of status and the worship of celebrity have become pervasive, probably more so than anywhere else in the academia. Intellectual discourse has come to be governed by rapidly shifting fashion. Work is judged by the sophistication than by the contribution it might make towards social change. Sophistication is understood to mean agility within a complex intellectual structure, the ability to engage in theoretical pyrotechnics, to intimidate others by a display of erudition. (1995:85-86)

Epstein's observation is similar to Homi Bhabha's comment in *Location of Culture* (1994) where he opposes the politicisation of theory-making as being Eurocentric. He observes that: "there is a damaging and self-defeating assumption that theory is necessarily the elite language of the socially and culturally privileged. It is said that the place of the academic critic is inevitably within the Eurocentric archives of an imperialist or neo-colonial West" (1994:28). These scholars directly criticize the unnecessary emphasis on and romanticisation of theory as a basis for intelligent scholarship. While the relevance and the necessity for theory in the academia as noted earlier cannot be overstated, its abuse must be discouraged especially if it does not aim to meet the requirements suggested by Nnaemeka above. However, as noted earlier, the kind of theoretical conclusion that this study has generated is a consequence of the reading and analysis of the plays and gender or feminist theories explored in the study.

Since the selected texts for this study are African-authored and African-contexted, it might be expected that they address gender and related questions in a similar manner. However, what has emerged from this investigation is that the two sets of plays coming from different geographic

spaces (Nigeria and South Africa) tend largely to articulate two different versions of feminist theorising. The plays with Nigerian socio-cultural and religious backgrounds as their settings tend towards Afrocentric feminisms, most of which are closely linked to theories produced by Nigerian writers. These plays are relatively synchronous in terms of their definitions of femininity and their handling of gender oppression, patriarchy and resistance. They can be read as epitomizing African feminist theories such as African womanism, motherism, Nego-feminism and Stiwanism, all of which were coined by Nigerian gender scholars. In *Little Drops* and *Abobaku*, we observe that gender is negotiated from a rather more traditional and conservative approach although not exclusively so. The oppressed women take less defiant or subversive approaches to their oppression from men. In *Abobaku* for instance, Faramola is a wife whose life depends on that of her husband. Whatever befalls her husband is automatically echoed in her life. When her husband becomes an abobaku, her immediate feeling is how she will become a widow. This stems from the fact that her husband will eventually be buried along with the dying king and she will become a widow despite her young age. Her reluctance to leave the husband and become self-independent, coupled with her decision to sacrifice herself in place of her husband, proves that she would rather negotiate with patriarchy than completely negate it by either walking away or taking a drastic resistant step as seen in the second set of plays considered in this study. In this play, the woman is defined as one whose existence and death depends absolutely on her husband. This means that she is defined in relation to the life and existence of her husband. Despite this gender certainty regading what it means to be a woman (subservient) and a man (dominant), we see these positions being reversed in the story of this couple.

In the second play, *Little Drops*, the women characters – Memekize, Mukume, Azue and Bonuwo – all adopt a conciliatory approach where, rather than taking drastic steps to uproot patriarchy, they adopt a liberal method of 'round table dialogue' as a means of conflict resolution. Kuru, one of the men who has been tormenting and killing them as a way of demonstrating social masculinity is found in their midst. Kuru finds himself in the midst of these women badly injured from the crisis going on in the city. With his life readily at their mercy, the women decide firstly to care for him in the fashion of mothers by tending to the wounds he sustained from the battle in town before engaging him in a dialogue as a way of uprooting patriarchy rather than take the radical route of harming him or beating him up as someone like Dworkin might encourage. If viewed from the reverse perspective, Kuru will not spare the lives of the women in the same way that they have

spared his. The gesture displayed by the women means that, unlike the men depicted in the play, women will allow peace not violence as a means to resolve conflict. This method of negotiation and the practice of not 'attacking the attacker' is clearly African womanist in orientation. In *Aetu* likewise, Old Woman's decision to forgive the men who rape her and cause her death is also 'pro-African feminist'. At the graveside where she could administer more pain to these men by her refusal to forgive and negotiate, she calls for a conjugal and inclusive effort to bury patriarchy. In these three plays, all the steps adopted by these characters to resist patriarchy and female subjugation are non-confrontational, non-exclusivist and totally contrary to what is seen in the second strand of plays.

In the second strand of plays, all written by South Africans, gender equality is treated very differently from the plays mentioned above. Not many notable gender theories have emerged in South Africa in comparison to Nigeria; however, this does not in any way suggest that gender issues are not engaged with from a theoretical perspective. In fact, this subject is arguably more discussed in South Africa than anywhere else on the continent of Africa. The considered attention given to gender and sexism in South Africa is understandable. Statistically, South Africa is one of the countries with the highest rate of gender violence against women in the world: (UNODC South Africa 2002 and Jewkes Abrahams 2013). It could be argued that because of the rate of gender abuse in South Africa, it is understandable that playwrights and especially the ones selected in this study take the strong and confrontational approach towards uprooting patriarchy.

In the four South African plays explored, the two plays, *At Her Feet* and *So What's New?* include no male characters. This is utopic and could be read as a call for a 'male-less society' or could suggest a kind of anti-male or male-phobic stance. In these plays, the importance of the male gender in the society is not advanced. Rather, men are clearly rendered insignificant. This is especially the case in *So What's New?*. Whereas *At Her Feet* sees men in Islam as being oppressive in terms of their control over women's bodies and sexual lives, *So What's New?* agitates strongly for either a society without men or one with men not younger than sixty years old. The specificity of a particular age suggests that older men are potentially less violent in terms of physicality and therefore can easily be physically challenged by women if the need arises. *So What's New?* also proposes a feminist re-imagination of the world with the reverse sexist perspective. The characters imagine what they call 'reverse sexism' as an alternative way of dealing with patriarchy. Like

these two plays, *Flight from the Mahabarath* attempts to adopt a 'male-less' scenario, but also includes the pleading of two men who agree to be treated as equal to women and who present their unconventional/non-heteronormative as a means of being eligible for admittance into the new world. Out of more than twelve characters in the play, only two of them are male. Again, the ideal of a utopian society, devoid of men and any characteristics traditionally associated with men, is completely welcome in the world the women create for themselves. These two plays, *So What's New?* and *Flight of Mahabarath* address women's freedom and independence as well as asserting the completeness of a woman in herself without any attachment to men. This is a point noted by the editor of the anthology, Kathy Perkins who rightly observes that these two plays are "about women's liberation. [They] address independent women who are seeking their own identities in a male-dominated society" (1998:5). Tshali's *Weemen* also explores some features of radical feminism although in a different way to the previous three. The character Tsoarole is abused by her husband who is an alcoholic and financially insecure. At first, Tsoarelo bears this physical, mental and financial abuse until radical thoughts start coming into her head. When the abuse gets unbearable for her, Tsoarelo takes the radical step of beating her husband, an action which provides her with the freedom and authority that she craves.

While the plays in the second set are classified in this study as radical, proactive and reactive to oppressive practices, it is also important to note that Aetu's defiance in *Aetu* can also be classified in the same way as those plays arising from the South African context. The play engages examples of gender practices such as levirate marriage, rape and forced marriage which led to Aetu's defiant resistance: she casts a spell on her past, present and future oppressors before making the final and most devastating action to subvert her oppressors, namely suicide. She commits suicide to prove her resistance against all kinds of traditional and customary oppression that she faces because of her gender. The ultimate resistance of suicide suggests her position as a woman who resists patriarchy but is also imprisoned within its cultural norms: thus, she cannot fight patriarchy and keep her life at the same time. However, through self-immolation, she makes her opposition against this oppression known. Although consequentially a beneficial move for younger girls coming after her, she misses out on the freedom she deserves. Therefore, her death as a way of protest against patriarchy can be seen in the same light as those of the South African plays. As has been highlighted in the chapters preceding this and briefly later in this section, the two sets of plays

from South African and Nigerian settings present different definitions of womanhood as well as different responses (ranging from tolerance to resistance) to gender abuse and violence.

In a similar study of African women gendered-experience as depicted in the different plays explored in this study, Gqola uses Mariama Ba's novel, *So Long A Letter* (1980) to address the theme of difference and polyphony among African women and their perceptions of inequality. Gqola notes that the text

> reminds its readers of the inevitability of difference and points to ways in which its existence strengthens sisterhood. That Aissatou, Ramatoulaye and Jacqueline are able to support each other, even when they disagree, emphasises the centrality of specificity and agency in womanist narratives. (2001:14)

These women go through similar patriarchal experiences, but they handle them differently. The difference in their resistance to similar patriarchal experiences suggests the differences that define the lives of African women and their perceptions of women's experience. All the plays examined in this study are polyphonic and this device can be seen as offering an implicit theoretical insight about the importance of understanding African women's experience as heterogeneous.

At the beginning of this study, it was opined that following Nnaemeka's concept of third space, the study will also open up a space where both sets of feminisms explored in these plays can be seen in dialogue with one another, thereby, opening up a new space for gender discourse. To this end, and in closing, I offer some tentative observations on a theoretical position which could be derived from the notion of the 'third space', obervations which also derive from the reading and analysis of the plays and the feminist/womanist theories applied throughout the study and which point to the possibility of fruitful further theoretical development. Going by the brief feminist actions that transpire in these plays, it is possible to argue that the various ways in which gender is negotiated across the plays in question suggests that the idea of feminism is ambiguous and unstable, thereby, opening up a different space where alternative concepts of African women's experiences can be codified. In this respect, it is vital to consider the different contextual paradigms of these women's experiences in terms of gender and gender oppression since the experiences of women are not always identical. Every situation/content arises from a context, and this must be addressed before meaningful knowledge can be proposed. A similar observation in terms of context and content is made by Bhabha when writing on cultural difference and diversity. Bhabha declares that "there is no way that the content of [a] proposition will reveal the structure of its

positionality; *no way that context can be mimetically read off from the content*" (1994:53 emphasis added). This observation enunciates the importance of context in the creation and explanation of content/situation. Although literary texts cannot be said to offer sociological insights in any simple or unmediated way, they nevertheless depict a different way through which human lives can be perceived. Therefore, for my purposes, the literary representation takes on unique qualities precisely because of the differences in context; in other words, the varieties of female characters we find in the plays and the different ways in which they respond to their circumstances is directly related to the specificities of their context. In the schemata of gender concerns interrogated in the plays, the role of difference is considered and incorporated as I proceed with my theorisation. In this instance, given the South African and Nigerian contexts from whence the selected plays originate, historical and contemporary socio-cultural nuances, political conventions, religious and individual values accentuate the variance of the modes of feminist response and resistance to gender oppression depicted in these plays. These differences determine and enhance the peculiarities in the characters' responses to oppression, not only of the shared characters reactions in each play, but also their individual reactions and the plays' proposed solutions. On this basis, I would like to advance a form of feminist ideology I refer to as Consequentialist Feminism. This comes on the back of the differences that have been identified in the plays as well as the western feminists and African womanist theories that have been used to analyse them. Consequentialist feminism is taken from the moral or philosophical ideology of consequentialism which, according to Samuel Scheffler, "is a moral doctrine which says that the right act in every situation is the one that always produce the right outcome" (1988:1). For Amartya Sen (1987), "consequentialism demands, in particular, that the rightness of actions be . . . judged entirely by the goodness of consequences" (75). Stephen Darwall (2002), Douglas Portmore (2011) also make a similar observation. I consider this concept relevant in this study because it helps to open up a further space for the exploration of feminism and women's experiences. Consequentialist Feminism, then, is a gender concept which considers the oppression or the perception of oppression of an individual from personal, contextual and consequential points of view rather than from a collective standpoint. In another words, consequentialist feminism focuses on peculiar individualized cases, contexts and consequences. In this way, gender oppression has to be interpreted from individual and contextual sites with specific attention given to the outcome of actions.

This form of theory is similar to feminist existentialism, which prioritises autonomy and the experience of individual persons over generally acceptable or defined standards. According to Juliana Okoh, "existentialists have held that human beings do not have a fixed nature, or essence, as other animals and plants do. Each human being makes choices that create his or her own nature" (2012:73). The difference between existentialist feminism and consequentialist feminism lies in the special attention to consequence or 'what follows' from gendered experience. I propose that if an experience or an action results in the goodness, pleasure and peace of mind for an individual, (which are essentials for human's life), then such experience or action can be defined as potentially good. Any gender experience that leaves the person involved (especially the female person) in some sort of peace, pleasure and ultimate satisfaction, can be judged good whether or not other theories or observers agree. This is a relativist method of analysing gender activities which is important because it allows for each case to be treated independently; in this view, the consequence is considered more important than the process that unfolds. Although from a general point of view, and from the reading of all seven plays analysed in this study, we see commonalities in the ways in which women, and to some extent men, are subjugated, oppressed and abused, we nevertheless understand these experiences as specific and unique.

Starting with *Aetu*, the first text analysed in this study, we observe that Aetu is passed from one man to the other as custom demands. The two midwives present at her third delivery – Agbebi and Agbesu – engage in a debate about the subject of wife inheritance. While Agbebi calls her lucky because a family loves her enough to want her to stay, Agbesu sees the situation as oppressive; interestingly, this difference in views occurs even though both characters are victims of patriarchal chauvinism. At this point, it is necessary to point out that Agbebi, who compliments Aetu for being lucky, is not ignorant or a victim of false consciousness as western feminists and other critics might want to argue. By contrast, she is well informed and, as noted above, has had her share of patriarchal experience. While one character considers it as a form of abuse, another refers to it as an honour. What is important in these contrasting views is the opinion of the individual going through that particular experience and its consequences. In Aetu's case, she personally regrets and curses the day she was born and curses herself for being a woman. However, when she is asked by Kudi if being a woman means suffering, she rejects this argument. Aetu agrees that even though as an individual woman, she has been oppressed, abused and violated, her case cannot be generalised. So, rather than perpetuating a subjective perception of a woman as eternal victim, she

personalises her plight and tells the girl that her own case is different from others. For Aetu, being a woman does not altogether translate to suffering but must be viewed on the basis of her experience. Despite her abuse by men, Aetu personalises her pain and refuses to use her condition to define those of other women. In other words, Kudi and other women have to work out what is oppressive for them. Her perception is similar to Aaisha Dadi Patel's definition of feminism. For her, "there is nothing as feminist as a woman's own voice telling her story" (2018:96). Each woman's story is different and must be treated differently.

In a similar vein, the opposing perceptions of patriarchy as viewed by Ganga and Gandhari in *Flight* address the importance of contextualizing gender experience and what might seem like oppression. Freedom from being the mother of heroes and the roles of wife and queen is granted to Gandhari as she is brought out from the epic to the new world, but her choice of being a mother and queen cannot be usurped by the freedom that the new world offers. While other women question her choice, saying that she has been indoctrinated by tradition, she makes it clear that it is her choice and that she is not forced by tradition. Although choice can be problematised and debated by feminists, we must admit that it is nevertheless indispensable. What this plot line suggests is that similar experiences are perceived differently by different women. While Ganga does not adhere to the traditional concept of motherhood, Gandhari considers being a mother of a hundred sons as honourable. Another example from *At Her Feet* offers additional support for my argument. In this play, Auntie Kariema's and Sara's views on honour killing are completely dissimilar. While Auntie Kariema appears to blame Azra for flouting the law which forbids her from speaking to a man not her relative and thereby making her worthy of punishment in some sorts, Sara believes that she owns her body and should be allowed to do with it whatever pleases her. In these examples, I suggest, truth, freedom and oppression appear to be relative and personal feelings and choices are understood to be central. In this way, the consequences of individual woman's experiences are prioritized over a general definition of oppression. It is possible to contend that this unsteadiness in the delineation of gender oppression has somewhat hampered the course of universal feminism as a struggle or movement. This has therefore for the floodgate of constructions and deconstructions of feminist theories. The notion of womanhood or femininity proposed here is derived from an analysis of literary texts rather than from sociological data suggesting the extent to which literature can add to the richness of our understanding of gender experience.

I would not be so myopic to assume that consequentialism as a theory has not met with varying objections. For instance, James Lenman in "Consequentialism and Cluelessness" (2000) talks about how "impossible it is to know the future" which "means that you will never be absolutely certain as what all the consequences of your act will be" (342). Anthony Quinton (1973) also makes a similar observation. However, despite these criticisms, this study posits that a gendered action consists of different outcomes – some immediate, some not. It therefore seems appropriate to consider the idea of consequences in terms of the short and long term. On a related point, my argument might be subject to the criticism that it renders gender oppression non-existent or that oppression can be given a different name. This is not the case. Rather, the crux of this argument is that, from the reading and analysis of the selected plays, existentialism and consequentialism as theories of philosophy and ethics provide important points of departure for a feminist theory of women's experiences. While existentialism prioritises individuality as the most potent entry point into the notion and essence of things, consequentialism locates rightness and wrongness in relation to the outcome of an action. So, if a woman feels happy and at peace with herself as a third wife, a full housewife, wearing a hijab or preserving her body either for chastity or to please her spouse, then the consequence which in this case is peace and happiness makes her choice good. However, if her choices (or non-choices) produce the opposite outcome, then one can conclude that the situation is oppressive and abusive to that particular victim.

These deductions, derived from my analysis of the plays, are synchronous with the point made by British philosopher and economist, Tony Lawson who claims that "the differential historical experiences [of women] means that each 'woman' differs from every other and it is impossible or meaningless to talk of the 'authentic woman' and so to unify different individuals under the signifier 'woman'. There is no woman's (or of course man's) experience, situation or point of view" (2007:139). In similar vein, Julia Kristeva argues that "a 'woman' cannot 'be': it is something that does not even belong to the order of *being* … [In] 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" (2011:261). For these reasons, the special history, story and experiences of individual women must be treated singularly as she and her experiences do not stand for every other woman's experiences.

These arguments are also supported by the work of Canadian feminist, Dorothy Smith who in her famous scholarly work on feminist standpoint theory states that: "no two people have exactly the same standpoint" (2005:10). I will conclude with a popular Igbo proverb which says: '*adiro akuru ofuebe enene nwanu'*, translated as 'one cannot stand at a spot to watch a masquerade'. A masquerade's action never takes place on the spot. It dances around the community. And so, to enjoy it, one has to follow its movement. To get the detail of women's experience therefore, one must follow every aspect of it. A follower of women's lives must look at their lives from the many aspects. When you follow the masquerade that is the only time, they can see more than what they see when they remain at a spot. The problem with having to experience all these angles to derive a rich analysis of women's lives is that, it is impossible to see or experience these angles or perspectives simultaneously.

Every individual has a position which is gathered up from his personal experiences; thus this position has to be addressed independently. This also synchronises with Carole Boyce Davids' observation. After numerous studies of African women's writings both within African continent and diaspora, she observes that there are boundaries or differences in the understanding of the African woman and their experiences. These boundaries, she argues, foreground the existence of differences in these women in terms of their choices. Consequentialist feminism, therefore, asks us to consider the outcome of such actions/experiences as fundamental in ascribing meaning to women's lives.

As my analysis of selected Nigerian and South African plays has suggested, patriarchal demands enacted to control women tend to be abusive: they serve individualistic purposes and should be abolished**.** In *Aetu*, rape, paedophilia, and child marriage are outright examples of oppression. These concerns do not have to be related to the consequentialist barometer to be considered abusive. Gender violence in *Weemen***,** honour killing in *At Her Feet*, self-immolation in *Abobaku* are also examples of absolute oppression as they produce devastating consequences. But controversial subjects such as levirate marriage in *Aetu*, veiling in *At Her Feet*, motherhood in *Flight of the Mahabarath* and gender equality in *So What's New?* are more usefullt understiid within a consequential feminist paradigm. Like other feminist ideologies, this concept carries ambiguity and uncertainties; however, it is a concept that opens feminism up to future exploration. As stated earlier, the theory is an attempt to explain why certain practices which are perceived

from the outside as oppressive are not absolutely so. This means that the agency of women is acknowledged, and people are reflective and work out positions depending on what is happening. This conclusion is not dissimilar from Gqola's observation in 2001 where she advances that "theories from Blackwomen-centric spaces are no longer just concerned with writing back – to white feminists, to colonialism, to patriarchy, to apartheid and etc. – but are about *refashioning the world in exciting ways where the difference within is not a threat but a source of energy*" (11, emphasis added). To conclude, the study has sought to identify and highlight the differences in feminism not only between Africa and the west but also within Africa itself. Consequentialist feminism takes it further by stating that, because of these internal differences among African women in their perceptions and reactions to gender and patriarchy, the best way of identifying what constitutes gender oppression is to consider the situation from the perspective of individual woman and the outcome, immediate or long-term, of her experience.

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