

AFFIRMING THE HUMANITY OF OPPRESSED WOMEN: FEMALE ROLES IN
NAWAL EL SAADAWI'S *GOD DIES BY THE NILE*, FLORA NWAPA'S *ONE IS
ENOUGH* AND CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

Iniobong I. Uko

University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State
Nigeria

Abstract

Many women, especially black women, the world over suffer diverse forms of oppression. Sometimes their experiences question their humanity, or the authenticity of their humanity. Society evolves strict codes of behaviour for women in different cultures and the women are expected to comply unquestioningly with them. However, since some of those codes usually impinge on and actually threaten the humanity of women, some women raise questions and protest against them, as ways of liberating themselves from them. This study, which focuses on African women, examines the reactions of the women in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* to the oppressive systems from which they cannot escape. The paper submits that whether violent or not, the motive of each woman's response is to affirm her humanity as a strong, independent and effectual entity. The paper also seeks to develop an agenda that will help oppressed women to transcend docility and acquiescence.

Introduction

Torture is among the most gruesome of human manifestations. ...It is planned, and it stems from social order. It is a display of force, the aim of which is to break an individual's judgment. As a consequence, it breaks down parts of the victim's personality. The greatest challenge to the torture survivor is therefore to remain a human being under these inhumane conditions (Peter Elsass 1).

There are many trends and structures in several cultures of the world work towards oppressing women, especially black women. The women often lack the means or courage to save themselves because the

repressive trends and structures may be engrained in the ordinary patterns of the people's daily lives and activities. Sometimes, the severity of the oppression calls into question the humanity of the women. While focusing on three novels – El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* (1985), Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1986) and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) – this study traces a development in the roles of women in pursuing and sustaining their humanity and insisting on their rights as independent, powerful and efficient beings.

The oppression of women is prevalent in many cultures and religions in Africa, and it is portrayed in different ways by many writers. Its manifestations are varied and visible at all stages of the development of the female from the stage of the girl-child to the adolescent girl to the full-grown woman. To validate the oppressive practices and trends, society evolves laws and codes of conduct that ensure the perpetual exploitation and subjugation of women by men.

Certain factors operate singularly or in combination in diverse ways to oppress women. Prominent among them are marriage, childlessness, procreation, widowhood and levitation. In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, the marriage between Nnu Ego and Amatokwu produces no children and Nnu Ego is distressed because she feels that she has failed:

'When a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive. You shall soon see her children coming here to play.' Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father said with assurance. Nnu Ego and her new husband Amatokwu were very happy; yet Nnu Ego was surprised that, as the months passed, she was failing everybody. There was no child.

'I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right. How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed? I don't like going there these days because his wives always rush out to greet me hoping that I am already carrying a child. You can see the disappointment on their faces' (3).

Nnu Ego easily assumes responsibility for their childless marriage; it becomes her personal problem and she consults *dibias* secretly. She suffers diverse forms of oppression:

- from her husband who does not wish to fail his people, and who consequently takes a new wife;

- from her *chi* that punishes her for her father's misdeed of practising slavery; and,
- from her father's wives and members of her family who are anxious for her to have a child.

Amatokwu takes a second wife who bears children into the family, and Nnu Ego eventually leaves the marriage frustrated, desperate and dejected.

Childlessness and its consequences constitute female oppression. This form of oppression manifests also in families that have no male children. Thus metaphorically, a woman that bears only daughters is practically childless. Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood*, has two daughters, and at the death of her husband, is inherited by Ezeife, her late husband's brother and Nnu Ego's second husband. Ezeife's inability to provide for the large family (including Nnu Ego and her nine children) makes Adaku to leave with her daughters, stressing: 'I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons ...' (169). By implication, the woman's sanity is threatened by her condition of childlessness.

However, Nnu Ego, who stays on in the marriage is burdened by child-bearing and nurturing, which are the means that society deploys to enslave women. Society conditions a traditional wife like Nnu Ego so she 'would never dream of leaving her children' (137). She therefore becomes a 'prisoner, imprisoned by her love for her children, imprisoned by her role as the senior wife' (137). Nnu Ego laments: 'sometimes ... I wish I didn't have so many children. Now, I doubt if it was worth all the trouble' (202).

Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* also suffers oppression through child-bearing and nurturing, and then abandonment by her husband of thirty years. She bears twelve children while in marriage with Modou Fall, and then he leaves her and marries Binetou, the age-mate of their first daughter, Daba. Like Nnu Ego, Ramatoulaye states: 'I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom when they form part of a couple... I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage' (55-56). Thus, consequently, she is oppressed in marriage; the neglect she suffers and the burden of the family that she bears are metaphors for oppression.

In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*, Esi Sekyi is a glamorous career lady who works in the Department of Urban Statistics, and is married to Oko Sekyi, a deputy school head. They both have a daughter, Ogyaanowa, and Esi shows no interest in having another child. Oko laments that:

... [after] six years of marriage. And what had he got out of it? Little. Nothing. No affection. Not even plain warmth. Nothing except one little daughter! Esi had never stated it categorically that she didn't want any more children. But she was on those dreadful birth control things, pills, loops or whatever. She had gone on them soon after the child was born, and no amount of reasoning and pleading had persuaded her to go off them. He wanted other children, at least one more... a boy if possible. But even one more girl would have been welcome (7-8).

By implication, Esi is in full control of her reproductive rights, and, one morning as Esi is preparing for work, 'Oko flung the bed cloth away from him, sat up, pulled her down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had determined to do all morning. He squeezed her breast repeatedly, thrust his tongue into her mouth, forced her unwilling legs apart, entered her, plunging in and out of her, thrashing to the left, to the right, ... and just pounding away. Then it was all over. ...' (9). Describing the experience as 'marital rape' (11), Esi feels hurt, abused and oppressed. Tangential to Ramatoulaye's experience of oppression in marriage, the oppression that Esi faces in marriage manifests in her husband's over-bearing desire for her.

Ogwoma's situation in Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods* presents a different form of oppression in marriage. Ogwoma's parents prevent her from marrying Uloko who she loves, forcing her instead to marry Adigwu because he is able to pay a higher bride-price. The money is needed to perform the sacrifice required for the recovery of Ogwoma's brother who is very ill. Thus Ogwoma serves as the sacrificial lamb for the restoration of her brother. She is bitter about the marriage and hates her husband who dies a few years afterward.

Widowhood and the attendant rites exploit African women in various ways. The widow is usually subjected to a variety of mourning rites, after

which she has to become levirate. In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye has to spend four months and ten days to mourn her husband who earlier abandoned her and the children for a new wife. Ogwoma in *Wedlock of the Gods* has to mourn Adigwu for three months. While Ramatoulaye accepts and mourns Mowdu Fall, Ogwoma refuses to mourn a man she never loved. She rather receives Uloko and gets pregnant during the period of mourning, an act that is regarded as abominable. The experience of mourning is itself exploitative because of the inhuman treatment and conditions that the woman is subjected to. She is required to dress in sack-cloths, stay in ashes and indoors, receive only very few and designated guests, but visit none, attend no functions or go to the market, have her head clean-shaven, and finally become levirate after the expiration of the mourning period.

Leviration or wife-inheritance has severe oppressive implications on women. Many women that encounter leviration often seek to re-marry men that they choose, rather than be coerced into marrying the male relatives of their deceased husbands. In *Wedlock of the Gods* and *So Long a Letter*, both Ogwoma and Ramatoulaye reject leviration. Adaku in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, who initially accepts to be inherited by Ezeife, her late husband's brother, cannot sustain it because she realizes that the practice actually smacks of enslavement and a plundering of her mind for the pleasure of the man.

The above survey highlights diverse perspectives of female oppression as portrayed in the works of selected female writers. The oppression is usually very intense and the victims are often not equipped to confront the values of the ubiquitous tradition. The docility of the women perpetuates their oppression and they seem to lose everything, sometimes including their lives if they attempt to complain or protest against the inhuman treatment that they suffer:

- In spite of all her sacrifice for her family, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* goes through a very miserable old age and a despicable death.
- Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* suffers emotional and physical trauma as her husband abandons her and their twelve children, and marries young Binetou. And at his death, she mourns him, and his relations seize from her all the money given to her by well wishers.

- In *Changes: A Love Story*, society does not recognize or appreciate the ambitious and hardworking Esi Sekyi. For divorcing her over-bearing husband and seeking to please and satisfy herself, society indicts her and everybody around her rejects her.
- In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Ogwoma's decision not to mourn her late husband, but to receive her lover constitutes defiance, and she pays for it with her life and that of her lover, while her mother-in-law (who poisons her), along with her parents, her friend, Anwasia, and others remains triumphant and the cruel traditional structures remain sacrosanct.

Indeed, the three novels selected for this study are unique as they depart from the above trend. El Saadawi in *God Dies by the Nile*, Nwapa in *One is Enough* and Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* demonstrate that the woman has the right to protest gainfully against any oppressive treatment. This is the focus of this study.

Forms of Female Oppression in the Three Novels

In El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*, Zakeya represents the peasants in Kafr El Teen, a village by the Nile River. The village is ruled by the Mayor who represents the government, but who uses 'his position to exploit the peasants, and to spend the money he squeezed out of them on his extravagant way of living, and his extravagant tastes in food, tobacco, wine and women' (13). Zakeya is a very poor farmer whose humanity is constantly assaulted by the oppressive machinery in Kafr El Teen.

She is married to Abdel Moneim and they have ten sons and six daughters, but they lose all except one son, Galal. She suffers battering from her husband, especially whenever she gives birth to a daughter. She faces life with her son, Galal, her brother, Kafrawi, and his two daughters, Nefissa and Zeinab. They continuously toil to survive but the harshness of the environment, the aridity of the land on which they farm, as well as the exploitative attitudes of the leaders (men) combine to threaten Zakeya's humanity and persistently negate all her striving to live.

Galal is conscripted into the army, and Nefissa flees Kafr El Teen to escape the Mayor's amorous attentions towards her. Then Sheikh Zahran, the Chief of the Village Guard and Sheikh Ismail, the village barber falsely accuse Kafrawi of killing Elwau. Sheikhs Zahran and Ismail, along with

Sheikh Hamzawi, the village Imam, are the immediate subordinates to the Mayor. They take charge of implementing the policies and wishes of the Mayor, for, to them, 'we are God's slaves when it's time to say our prayers only. But we are the Mayor's slaves all the time' (53). Their attitude towards women is influenced by the notion as stated by Haj Ismail that '...girls and women are only convinced if they receive a good hiding' (31). Thus, ultimately, they cause Kafrawi to be arrested and jailed, and then Zeinab is compelled to go and serve the Mayor, and he assaults her sexually.

Meanwhile, Zakeya is smothered by extreme poverty and loneliness. She laments as she gestures rebuttal: 'I have not ceased praying and begging God to help us. And yet every day our misery becomes greater, and we are afflicted with a new suffering' (67). Her experiences represent those of the peasants who 'are getting more and more hungry. All they have to eat is some dry bread and wormy salted cheese. And hunger makes a man blind. It makes him see no one, neither ruler nor God. Hunger breeds heretics ...' (127). These affect Zakeya in different ways and condition her decision in the future.

In Nwapa's *One is Enough*, the childless situation in the marriage between Obiora and Amaka generates oppression towards Amaka and initiates a sequence of reactions from her. Amaka is a prosperous trader, but in the six years of her marriage, she has no children. As a result, Obiora's mother helps him to marry another woman who bears him two sons, and when Amaka raises the matter with Obiora, he flares up:

You barren and senseless woman! You forget that you are childless. You would not raise your voice in this house if you were sensible. You should go about your business quietly and not offend anyone because if you do, one would be tempted to give you one or two home truths... (19).

Considering her reality, Amaka wonders if having children is really what makes a woman's life worthwhile; '... was she useless to the society if she were not a mother? Was she useless to the world if she were unmarried? Surely not. Why then was she suffering these indignities both from her husband and his mother? She could adopt a son and a daughter...' (20). The marriage degenerates to the point of Obiora battering Amaka, and

lying to her. He fails to realize that to discover that one has been lied to in a personal relationship... leads one to feel a little crazy' (Adrienne Rich 186). Thus, on one occasion, Amaka defends herself by hitting Obiora on the chest with a hammer, after which she leaves the marriage for Lagos.

By leaving, she symbolically escapes the diverse forms of oppression:

- that characterize a childless marriage in the parochial closed-in Onitsha society;
- that a childless woman suffers in the hands of her mother-in-law;
- that a childless senior wife experiences in the hands of a junior wife that already has two sons.

By quitting the marriage, Amaka invalidates the notion that initially conditioned her perception of life:

There seem to be some magic about the word 'husband'. Her people had drummed it into their ears as children growing up that a girl just had one ambition – to be married. So all energy was geared towards finding her a good husband (22).

Essentially, Amaka is conscious that the oppressive attitudes of her husband and his mother toward her are caused largely by her being childless. She is also aware of Linda Strong-Leek's assertion that 'the idea of independence is inherently tied to the idea of masculinity..., while the ability to conceive is connected to one's femininity. An independent woman is a man; a barren woman is a man' (84). Amaka therefore, owes herself the duty of evolving an image that can be respected, whether or not she has children.

Accordingly, it is only appropriate that Amaka relocates to Lagos to seek better opportunities for herself. She encounters a different form of oppression as she tries her hands on contract jobs in the city. She realizes that in Lagos, 'no man can do anything for a woman... without asking her for her most precious possession – herself' (67-68). To secure contract jobs and successfully execute them, Amaka has had to sleep with the Alhaji who she does not love, but who assists her enormously. She also has an affair with Reverend Father Izu Mclaid from whom she also obtains assistance in Lagos. These relationships in Lagos, along with the depressing experiences of childlessness threaten Amaka's pride as a person and call into question her integrity and usefulness as an enterprising and prosperous woman that she has been.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* presents a postcolonial Nigerian family that is headed by Eugene Achike (Papa), who is 'both a religious zealot and a violent figure..., [often] subjecting his wife, Beatrice, [the children] Kambili... and ... Jaja to beatings and psychological cruelty' (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purple_Hibiscus). Papa is a wealthy businessman and a very strict Catholic who dominates his family by imposing a harsh religious regime on the family. As an important man in society, Eugene (Papa) donates considerable amounts of money to charity. He is also prone to outbreaks of violence within his family; a trait that exposes his wife and two children to severe physical punishment and torture. The worst kind of oppression is the stifling power of abuse – verbal, mental, and physical abuses wrought by Eugene. He is at once consumed by raw extremes of passion – extreme love and, worse, extreme anger. His family live every minute in sheer terror, looking upon Papa for constant approval (<http://www.curledup.com/hibiscus.htm>).

Purple Hibiscus is, on the one hand, the story of Nigeria that is experiencing socio-political, economic and cultural turmoil, and whose body polity is at the brink of collapse. On the other hand, the novel captures the diverse intra- and inter-personal crises that occur among the members of the Achike family due to the uncompromising despotic head, Eugene. Significantly, whether the overt target of Eugene's violence is Jaja or Kambili, Beatrice the mother, suffers the brunt of each occasion of violence. At the age of ten, when Jaja takes the catechism test, he misses two questions and is not named the best in his First Holy Communion class. In reaction to this, Eugene locks him into a room upstairs and cuts the little finger of his left hand, and then takes him to the hospital. Jaja explains that Papa had avoided the right hand because it is the hand he writes with (145).

At another time, Jaja fails to go to communion during Mass on the excuses that 'the wafer gives me bad breathe' (6), and 'the priest keeps touching my mouth and it nauseates me' (6). Eugene is infuriated by such sacrilege and flings the missal toward him. The missal misses Jaja but hits 'the glass étagère, which Mama polished often. It cracked the top shelf, swept the beige finger-size ceramic figurines of ballet dancers' (7). Beatrice 'stared at the figurine pieces on the floor and then knelt and

started to pick them up with her bare hands' (7). She cleans up the pieces quietly and absorbs the hurt that she feels by the loss of her treasures.

When Kambili feels severe cramps as her menstruation starts on a Sunday morning, Beatrice and Jaja make her to eat cornflakes so as to take Panadol. But Eugene gets angry at them all for violating the Eucharistic fast: he whips Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili severely with his belt, declaring that the devil is leading them to sin. Also, as Eugene goes to Nsukka to collect Jaja and Kambili from Aunty Ifeoma's house, he realizes that his father, Pa Nnukwu has been staying in that house also. On arrival in Enugu, he explains to the children and Beatrice that it was sinful for the children to have stayed in their aunt's house with his heathen father. Their act of acquiescence thus implies that they had seen sin and walked right into it. For that, Eugene gets Kambili into the bath-tub, and pours boiled water over her feet. Beatrice watches as Kambili shouts in pain, but she can do nothing, just as the children could do nothing as they return from Nsukka to find that their mother's 'face was swollen and the area around her right eye was black-purple shade of an overripe avocado' (190), yet she is smiling. However, Beatrice helps Kambili out of the bath-tub and applies on the feet a mixture of salt and cold water.

On another occasion, Eugene discovers that Jaja and Kambili have a painting of Pa Nnukwu, which they had brought back from Nsukka. He regards this as atrocious, and an indication that his children are inclining to heathen ways and values. In fury, he tears up the portrait, kicks and beats up Kambili so intensely that she loses consciousness and ends up in the hospital. Again, Beatrice only watches helplessly. Kambili regains consciousness but because her condition is so poor, she remains in hospital for a long time, and on being discharged, Eugene concedes to her visiting Aunty Ifeoma again in Nsukka along with Jaja. He also cruelly batters Beatrice until she miscarries a six-week old pregnancy. She explains:

You know that small table where we keep the family Bible...? Your father broke it on my belly... My blood finished on that floor even before he took me to St. Agnes [Hospital] (248).

The diverse forms of brutality that Eugene unleashes on Beatrice and their two children, of which the repercussions Beatrice bear physically,

emotionally and psychologically, have the effect of radically transforming her into a different personality with a different form of silence that propels her to react.

The Roles of the Oppressed Women

The above appraisal reveals how the women – the protagonists of the three novels – have been brutalized in various ways. Each of them develops from a stage of naïve silence and acquiescence to a stage of realization and reaction, often violent reaction. This may be explained by their need not only to restore their self-esteem, but to sustain their humanity. The oppressed women's pursuits of their humanity unavoidably have varied impact on the sources of their oppression. They include hurt and death.

In El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile*, Zakeya accuses Allah as the cause of all her problems, losses and hopelessness. She sees the Mayor in his might and splendour as the human manifestation of Allah. Feeling sure of her opinion, she declares 'I was blind, but now my eyes have been opened' (135), and she is convinced of the rationale of her ideas, even though 'the fearsome look in her eyes was still there, almost like madness...' (135). Based on these factors, Zakeya smashes the Mayor's head with her big hoe as the Mayor walks out of his house. By murdering him, Zakeya becomes assured of her humanity, even if she may eventually be hanged. By being responsible for the Mayor's loss of humanity while she is alive, she attains superiority over him. By killing him, she becomes fulfilled through the realization of the source of her oppression and her ability to eliminate it.

In Nwapa's *One is Enough*, Amaka is conscious that her being childless is the cause of the indignities, abuses and cruelty that she experiences in the hands of her husband, Obiora, and his mother. And after she leaves the marriage for Lagos, the demands to sleep with men so as to secure contract jobs and funding for them, introduce her to a new type of torture, which combines with the trauma of childlessness to threaten her humanity. She remarks to Father Mclaid:

... please don't misunderstand my motive for coming to Lagos ... I have not come to Lagos to be a prostitute. I have come to start again...

I want to live a decent life in Lagos... I wanted to get out of the place [the marriage and the village] where I suffered most. I don't want to be reminded of my life with my husband. It is too painful (52-53).

Indeed, Lagos gives Amaka hope, and her access to Father Mclaid makes things possible, as she tells him: 'For I believe... that I must have children. The gynaecologists have had their say, but I know that a child will come in God's own time' (53). Father Mclaid's kind disposition toward Amaka encourages her:

She was going to exploit the situation. What drove her to see Father Mclaid was just the contract and nothing else. Now other things were working in her mind... She was going for a kill. A priest was also a man, capable of manly feelings. Perhaps Father Mclaid had never been tempted. She, Amaka, was going to tempt. That was a task that must be done (53-54).

The above indicates Amaka's resolve to use Father Mclaid to achieve her objectives of working hard to make money and pay back to Obiora the dowry he paid to her family, satisfying her erotic desires, and taking care of herself. Amaka is aware that the norms that generate female oppression are largely reflected in customs. Morolake Omonubi-McDonnell asserts that 'the Nigerian customary law emanates from the ideology of patriarchy and conservatism. It encourages and reinforces the subservience of women confirmed by traditional polygamous marriage arrangements which make women into wholly owned properties of men (191-192). Amaka is sensitive to these and reacts against them.

Amaka carefully pursues her vision by ensuring that her relationship with Father Mclaid is sustained. In a short while, by wielding the erotic weapon, she is able to buy a car for herself, build a house, and then travel to Onitsha to refund the dowry to Obiora. The relationship also produces a set of twin boys, but Amaka refuses to marry Father Mclaid who has left the priesthood to marry her. Though quite traumatic to him, Amaka is satisfied because the fact of her womanhood has become concrete

through the reality of her motherhood. In motherhood, Amaka finds contentment and surmounts the reproach, disgrace and condemnation that she bore all along as a childless woman. Herein lies her affirmation of her humanity.

In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene Achike's brutality directly toward his wife, Beatrice, or indirectly through his high-handedness on their two children, and Beatrice's helplessness and silence generate in Beatrice the psychology of the oppressed that must wage vengeance. Using the cultural model of disproportionate revenge, Alexander L. Hinton explains that a person will hold a grudge when he or she understands that another person has done something very bad to him or her; he or she will have this one thought kept inside his or her heart. Such a grudge most often arises when another person makes the individual in question suffer, lose power and/or lose face, it almost always involves anger, shame, and the desire to defeat a foe (140). This is the background that determines and controls Beatrice's reactions to her husband's tyranny towards her and the children.

Beatrice therefore poisons Eugene and admits: 'I started putting poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka' (290). Her action is explained by David Apter who analyses that the reactions to violence may go through a typical cycle from chance events, to protest, to confrontation, to interpretive discourse, quite often passing through intergenerational violence, to arrive at negotiated solutions (4). Beatrice finds that how to prevent violence, how to establish and maintain both a peaceful atmosphere and freedom in the family are what the elimination of Eugene is about. The autopsy confirms poisoning, Jaja claims responsibility and is jailed. Beatrice has been different since then; 'she went about telling people that she killed Papa, that she put the poison in his tea. She even wrote letters to newspapers. But nobody listened to her; ... they think grief and denial – that her husband is dead, and that her son is in prison – have turned her into this vision of a painfully bony body... Perhaps it is why they forgive her for not wearing all black or all white for a year. Perhaps it is why nobody criticized her for not attending the first- and second-year memorial Masses, for not cutting her hair' (296).

Clearly, to regain and sustain her humanity, Beatrice kills her husband, an act that is so strange that even though she confesses to it, she is not taken seriously. It is also an act that results from malice. Hinton highlights that malice is a pattern in which an event or a series of smaller incidents causes a person to suffer or be shamed, which in turn leads to anger, resentment, and ultimately, the desire for revenge (143). To free herself and indirectly the children from the oppression and bondage that life with Eugene symbolizes, she does not mourn him, or dress in black, or cut her hair as expected of a widow. Also, she boycotts the memorial Masses in Eugene's honour; still, society excuses her, and this is both significant and symbolic because Eugene has merely suffered for his offence, which Achebe notes in the assertion that 'to abandon the gods of one's father and go about with a lot of effeminate men clucking like old hens was the very depth of abomination' (152-153).

Though Jaja spends thirty-one months in jail without trial, there is peace in the family. The silence that hangs over the family is peaceful, not the turbulent and oppressive silence that Eugene's tyranny had imposed on the family. Kambili explains that 'silence hangs over us, but it is a different kind of silence, one that lets me breathe. I have nightmares about the other kind, the silence when Papa was alive. In the nightmares, it mixes with shame and grief and so many more things...' (305). Within this new silence, Beatrice is human; with Eugene dead, Beatrice's life, and of course, the lives of Jaja and Kambili are credible and devoid of battering, disgrace and helplessness.

Conclusion

The cruel experiences of women often generate in them feelings of revenge. The cruelty is mainly because society has aligned the opposition male/female with 'rational/emotional, serious/frivolous, reflective/spontaneous; (independent/dependent) and feminist criticism of the second moment works to prove itself more rational, serious, and reflective than male readings that omit and distort' (Jonathan Culler 58). However, Chikwenye Ogunyemi expounds many writings by women, as counter-narratives, fascinate with their inherent contradictions as they

reveal strength and weakness, beauty and ugliness, ambiguity and clarity, in unfolding the politics of oppression (4).

Whether in the family or in the larger society, the oppressed woman remains a pawn and a victim in the hands of the agent(s) of oppression. Unattended in that situation, the oppressed woman's condition degenerates and often threatens her dignity as a woman, and her sanity and life as a human being. According to Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi, female characters in the novels (as in many other writings by women) are portrayed not in stereotypical subservient, unchanging roles, or in roles that are deliberately limiting. Instead, they come alive as speaking subjects and agents of change. The ability of these characters to reclaim the power of speech, sometimes usurping it, sometimes alternately silencing and unsilencing themselves, has made it possible to read these novels as theoretical texts (151).

The survey above reveals that contemporary realities require and also empower the oppressed woman to use whatever is at her disposal to react to sustain her humanity, and to restore her sense of worth. Indeed, the oppression of women is deeply embedded in the entire economic, political, and social structures of capitalist society, and women must recognize and organize around their problems, and unify diverse struggles for liberation. Eleanor B. Leacock observes that the very totality of women oppression means that when they move to change their situation, they move against the entire structure of exploitation (311-312).

Zakeya kills the powerful Mayor of Kafr El Teen with her hoe; Amaka seduces the priest and attains wealth and motherhood; and, Beatrice kills her husband, Eugene by poisoning and ignores the rites of mourning expected of her. Each of these constitutes an aspect of protest by the woman. Whether violent or not, whether repugnant or not, each woman's response to her condition is to affirm her humanity and to validate her as a strong and capable being with potentialities. These are the issues that twenty-first century women have to realize in their marriages and or in society as a whole. As Laura O'Toole argues, 'advocates working with victims of (domestic) violence are aware that lasting social conditions would not occur without increased public education and legislative

action' (248). Within this context resides the veracity of what the various governments and non-governmental organizations can do to contribute to the process of checking some aspects of the oppression of women in the micro and macro societies. By recognizing and being sensitive to these realities, women would help society to regard them with some integrity so as to reduce the degree of abuse and repression of women by men.

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