TRANSLOCATION AND SEXUAL/TRANS POLITICS AND POETICS IN CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK*, AKWAEKE EMEZI'S *THE DEATH OF VIVEK OJI*, AND RAZINAT MOHAMMED'S *HABIBA*

By

Onyeka Miracle Dike

A thesis submitted to the Department of English, McGill University, Montreal

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Arts.

June 1, 2023

Table of Content

Abstract

Feminism is complex and always rife with tensions. These tensions are based in the intersectionality of people represented by the fluid and socially constructed subject of feminism, which is often called 'women.' Since the 1960s, global feminist movements have struggled to incorporate the views of Black, Indigenous, lesbian, trans, and queer subjects while retaining coherence in their demands for rights; this intersectionality has spawned diverse kinds of feminism that are rooted in distinct locations and temporalities.

In this essay, I study the representation of gender and sexuality in fiction by three contemporary women writers (two Nigerians and one biracial author), Chimamanda Adichie, Akwaeke Emezi, and Razinat Mohammed, focusing on how factors like location, background, and other forms of socialisation end up influencing how they construe issues of feminism, gender and sexuality in their books. I argue that the society in which these writers engage in their literary production goes a long way towards determining how they construe gender and sexuality, and that the reception of these topical issues by their readers is also shaped by the moral values in those societies.

Abstrait

Le féminisme est complexe et toujours en proie à des tensions. Ces tensions reposent sur l'intersectionnalité des personnes représentées par le sujet fluide et socialement construit du féminisme, souvent appelé "femmes". Depuis les années 1960, les mouvements féministes mondiaux se sont efforcés d'intégrer les points de vue des Noirs, des autochtones, des lesbiennes, des transgenres et des queers tout en conservant la cohérence de leurs revendications en matière de droits ; cette intersectionnalité a donné naissance à divers types de féminisme ancrés dans des lieux et des temporalités distincts.

Dans cet essai, j'étudie la représentation du genre et de la sexualité dans la fiction de trois écrivaines contemporaines (deux Nigérianes et une biraciale), Chimamanda Adichie, Akwaeke Emezi et Razinat Mohammed, en me concentrant sur la manière dont des facteurs tels que le lieu, l'origine et d'autres formes de socialisation finissent par influencer la façon dont elles interprètent les questions de féminisme, de genre et de sexualité dans leurs livres. Je soutiens que la société dans laquelle ces écrivains s'engagent dans leur production littéraire détermine dans une large mesure la manière dont ils interprètent le genre et la sexualité, et que la réception de ces questions d'actualité par leurs lecteurs est également façonnée par les valeurs morales de ces sociétés.

Acknowledgements

Coming back to the academia after a ten-year hiatus was surely not going to be the easiest thing to do. I had lived several lives and witnessed more than a few full moons, starting as a graduate scholar at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, then to my stint in the bank, before stepping out to respond to the cries of the little baby inside me. But I came full circle and returned to my first love – academia.

Now a proverbial old man learning to walk again, I needed all the support and encouragement I could get. I knew I had it inside me, but I needed someone to validate that thing inside and tell me I could do it. Professor Monica Popescu gave me the first YES, and consistently kept validating me all through the programme. Without her affirming my research interests and encouraging me to apply for the MA programme, I probably would not have been here today. Despite dealing with some health challenges during the later days of the programme, she still consistently showed up for me, and I am deeply grateful for the gift that she is.

Professor Katherine Zien learnt about my funding concerns from Professor Popescu after I gained admission to the programme, and long before I applied for my study visa. She graciously offered me some stipends from her grant and reserved it for me even after I missed the fall resumption date due to delays in study visa approval. She also graciously agreed to become my supervisor after Professor Popescu had to go on a medical vacation, and she was very understanding and more than supportive every step of the way. Her invaluable and detailed feedback on each chapter broadened my scope and showed me how much more ground I needed to cover. I owe her a debt of gratitude.

Mathias Orhero of the English Department handheld me through the visa application process, picked me from the airport when I arrived in Montreal, and provided me accommodation for the first one week before I was able to get my accommodation. He has also been a great sounding board and motivation all through the duration of this programme. This is me saying thank you.

Anurika Azubuike was the person God used to divinely connect my company, SmartEdge, to the World Bank Group, and working with Chuka Agu and other friends at the international organisation, we were able to deliver very important projects with significant

impact. Payments I got from those projects helped to partly fund this master's programme, while the rest of it came from projects executed for Inclu'Serv Consulting on behalf of my second company, Ready Ink. My 'big sister', Lydia Nwajei, facilitated the connections, and I remain forever grateful to her.

I would not have been able to undertake this programme or come this far without the inimitable support of my dear wife, Kindness Onyeka-Dike. She helped to take care of our kids back in Nigeria during the first year of my programme and remained an unwavering pillar of support all through. Sunshine, I hope this also inspires you to be more and do even more. I love you with every fibre of my being.

To my parents and siblings, I owe you all huge gratitude for all your support. Thank you for the many times you checked up on me and prayed for me. Thank you for understanding my long silences and absences. I am done with the programme now, and I hope to remember to call more often. *Nke iru ka*.

I must thank the Department of English for the funding support they provided me at different times during this programme. Specific mention must be made of Professors Fiona Ritchie, Sandeep Banerjee, Miranda Hickman, Kenneth Borris, and Eli MacLaren for being wells of knowledge and support. Special thanks to Ms. Maria Vasile for always being ready to help and respond to all administrative questions; the MA cohort of 2023 for providing a system of support and inspiration; and to my PGSS family, for giving me the opportunity to serve and learn from them during my term as External Affairs Officer.

To the God of all flesh, in Whom I live, move and have my being; I am grateful for the gift of life and a productive mind. Thank You for all the miracles along this journey; for the open doors which I knew were made possible by You alone, I can never thank You enough. This life that I have is yours, and it will continually be for your glory.

Chapter One: Introduction

Feminism, sexuality and trans/gender politics has come to mean different things to different people, and the tensions that stem from this highly controversial topic manifest themselves in the conventional knowledge production and scholarship across continents. From one literary conference to another, gender seminars and feminism workshops, it is the reason for impassioned and animated debates, with different sides of the divide taking hard stances that are hardly possible to change. But one of the most distinct sites of these tensions can be found in different national literatures around the globe, with authors on the far left and the far right painstakingly casting their vision of the world vis-à-vis feminism and gender. And even for authors on the same side of the divide, there are steep variations that are occasioned by background, training, socialisation or even location. For instance, an author may subscribe to feminism but reject every form and manifestation of homosexuality simply because their religion or tradition opposes it, while another author might endorse gay relations but have reservations or remain indifferent about transgender politics. It is these strands of difference among authors of the same divide that I have chosen to focus on in this research.

Section 1: Literature and Gender Politics

Feminisms across localities can only be better conceived when studied in context, with the respective sociopolitical environment and cultural realities taken into consideration. But the first few decades of feminist thought and advocacy underscored a form of conspiracy to silence voices from the marginalised women of colour who also had to deal with the burdens of racism and economic disadvantage, in addition to sexism and sexual abuse. Patricia Collins believes that the suppression of such voices was considered a necessity by the West, as doing so only suggested that the oppressed also collaborated in their own victimisation. Whether it was in

Europe, the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, South America or any other place where black women existed, Collins notes that maintaining the invisibility of these women of colour was very important for sustaining the social inequalities that existed (*Black Sexual Thought* 3).

To achieve this, there was a deliberate effort to homogenise the experiences of women everywhere by introducing the concept of sisterhood, which suggested a universality of experiences by women, despite their colour. In doing this, the West still maintained its unassailable position as the concealed Subject, and the experiences of Western women were regarded as the collective experiences of all women across continents. Gayatri Spivak maintains that this same Subject often pretends that it has no geo-political determinations, in order to escape public critique (271-72). But, as Ochy Curiel informs us, Afro-descendant women continually questioned that concept of universality, emphasising that "patriarchy has different effects on women when they encounter these categories in their social relations" (478). It was even more difficult to consider the concept of sisterhood as solidarity, knowing that it only served to sustain White feminism, while invisibilising "the relationships of inequality, exploitation, and domination between Afro-descendant women and White feminists, particularly those that took place in the domestic space" (Curiel 480).

Despite the many barriers against black feminist thought, notable names like Alice Walker, Sojourner Truth, Toni Morrison, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, and several other leading Black American and African women made sure that their voices were heard. However, there was a recurring attempt to appropriate these voices and interpret them through the experiences and perspectives of White feminists. The Eurocentric privileging of Western experiences and cultural differences over the cultures of other climes is what Deborah Root refers to as cannibal culture, which, in simple terms, is the "West's will to aestheticize and

consume cultural difference" (xiii). An appropriative consumption of what Graham Huggan refers to as "culturally 'othered' goods" (12), which in this case, would mean the feminisms from other localities, ends up distorting the lenses through which we examine and understand the treatment of gender and sexual differences in subaltern cultures. bell hooks makes reference to this condescending attitude of Western readers towards other feminisms, explaining that though "they expected us to provide [first-hand] accounts of black experience, they felt it was their role to decide if these experiences were authentic" (*Feminist Theory*, 11). This attempt to paint feminism across global spaces and localities with a broad brush only ends up excluding and isolating the lived experiences of feminists in other places, particularly the Global South, who are doing their best to advance the cause of women in the spaces where they find themselves.

It therefore bears repeating that feminism and literature must be studied in context, and that is what this thesis is about: studying the literary aesthetics and feminist vision of three Nigerian authors who are at the confluence of varied influences. To better understand the construction of difference under the broad umbrella of sameness, I have chosen to interrogate three important books by two Nigerian and one Nigerian-Sri Lankan author: Chimamanda Adichie, Razinat Mohammed and Akwaeke Emezi. The books by these respective authors that I have chosen to analyse are *The Thing Around Your Neck*, *Habiba,* and *The Death of Vivek Oji*, and my purpose of reviewing these books is to demonstrate how the aforementioned factors shape how they construe feminism, gender, and trans issues. More specifically, I will be looking at what concepts like feminism, queerness, gender, and sexuality mean in their local environments, and how these authors try to articulate them in ways that can resonate locally.

Particularly, I will also be bringing their locations into context and showing how having a room of one's own (apologies to Virginia Woolf) can influence what they are allowed to present

in their fiction. For instance, I will demonstrate that Adichie and Emezi are able to fully explore LGBTQ motifs without any fear of censorship because of their geographical locations, while Mohammed only projects a rejection of patriarchy in the closet, as long as it does not trouble the larger social structure around her, which reflects the highly censored patriarchal society that she finds herself in. The politics of Western recognition which appears to fuel Emezi's writing career will also be discussed, as I try to explain why their presentation of an inverted *ogbanje* motif may not resonate with an Igbo audience, despite the book's wide reception in the West.

Section 2: Background Context

Section 2a. Feminism

Feminism has multiple definitions, shaped by diverse movements, nations, proponents and critics. But at the core of every feminist theory and advocacy is a desire to dismantle patriarchal structures. It is what Simone de Beauvoir describes as the duality of sexes, in which the man automatically assumes the position of the Subject or the Self, while the woman is regarded as the Other. Each feminist theory or thought has the primary objective of decentering and dismantling these preconceived notions and hierarchies of sex and gender, and strives towards the reconstruction of Otherness in relation to Self. Beauvoir further points out that, "the duality of the sexes, like any duality, gives rise to conflict" (20). As Judith Butler stresses, the concept of gender is constructed through relations of power (*Bodies,* ix). In another place, Butler argues that this understanding of gender "moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted social temporality" ("Performative Acts" 520). In essence, what we know as gender today is a social construction, and not based on biological factors. The media contributes in no small measure to the shaping of these gender constructs, and this is why Julia Wood believes that "media continue to present both

women and men in stereotyped ways that limit our perceptions of human possibilities" (32). This stereotypical representation subconsciously creates social containers in which the motifs of masculinity and femininity can be ensconced and easily differentiated.

In their introduction to *Living with Patriarchy,* Danijela Majstorovic and Inger Lassen ask: "[b]ut what does it mean to live in a patriarchal society, and does it mean the same to all women across the world" (1)? Reading different feminist theorists and critics, it is apparent that patriarchy is experienced diversely in different parts of the world, intersecting with factors including race, class, age, and nationality. bell hooks succinctly captures what marginality means in the following words: "[t]o be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body… We [Black women] could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin…" (*Feminist Theory*, Preface). This closeting and bracketing of women into certain spaces across continents and borders is a longstanding practice, compounded by social factors rooted in distinct locations and temporalities. Chandra Mohanty further reechoes these social realities, pointing out that being a woman comes with significant political consequences in the world we live in, and this is the reason for the "unjust and unfair effects on women depending on our economic and social marginality and/or privilege" (3). Feminism in these different spaces therefore means negotiating the respective marginalities peculiar to the women in those societies. It is due to this diversity, as well as Eurocentric conceptions of mainstream feminism, that global feminist movements have struggled to incorporate, or sometimes overtly excluded, the views of Black, Indigenous, lesbian, trans, and queer subjects over the past six decades.

Section 2b. Feminism in Nigeria

Feminism in Africa is far from monolithic, as there are different strands either mirroring or confronting the cultures and traditions of the respective locations. While there is an

identifiable homogeneity of purpose which draws from the fact that many African societies share similar patriarchal codes of domination, the local peculiarities in each of the respective African societies end up shaping the brand of feminism in those localities. Given the highly religious nature of African societies, the influence of the three major religions – Christianity, Islam and the traditional religion – cannot be overemphasised. These religions, in their fundamentalist strains, ascribe men different privileges, while seemingly subordinating women – a fact shared by nearly all fundamentalist forms of Western world religion. Kate Millett believes that "[f]undamentalist Christianity constantly thwarts feminism, and fundamentalist Islam has built its entire political program on a new subjection of women" (xiii).

In addition to feminism, LGBT individuals face challenges in Africa. Religion and the legal legacies of British colonialism, help to explain why homosexuality is criminalised in most African countries. Examining the lives and experiences of sexual minorities in societies where homosexuality is outlawed may give us an understanding of the different tensions that play out when it comes to issues of gender and sexuality, but it would present a distorted picture if it were considered in isolation, since laws do not determine social conduct, and anti-gay laws are rarely enforced. Moreover, LGBT politics is different from, and frequently in tension with, feminist concerns.

Yet, sometimes feminist and gay activism are linked. In South Africa, where same-sex relationships are legalised, for instance, feminist advocacy highlights issues of inclusion, social and political stigma, and the government's response to sexually transmitted diseases. It also encompasses issues of categorisation of nonconforming gender and sexuality, especially for people who do not appear to fit into rigidly constructed gender classifications. In an article, "Caster Semenya: Gods and Monsters", one of the leading feminists in South Africa, Brenna

Munro, critiques the failure to create space for people whose sex, gender and sexuality do not fit into prescribed social norms, "while simultaneously raising the matter of how the world imagines racial difference and African bodies today" (383-84). This further reinforces the malleable nature of feminism, especially in former colonies with distinct colonial experiences.

Until recently, identifying as a feminist in Nigeria was considered a taboo, and such people were often highly stigmatised the same way. Even though there have been different women's movements that date back to the precolonial era and some others in existence till the present day, there is still social stereotyping that comes with being called a feminist in Nigeria. Bene Madunagu informs us that even radical movements are still afraid of men's judgments; hence, there are some "gender activists who would rather not be associated with feminism, publicly or privately" (666). She also identifies another category of people who are proud feminists only when they are among other feminists but are quick to refer to feminists as "those crazy people" when they are outside that circle; and then, finally, the category of feminists that believe feminism has limits, and are generally silent when issues of sexual rights are discussed (666). Chimamanda Adichie captures this conundrum even more poignantly when she recalls the first time that she was ever called a feminist: "[i]t was not a compliment. I could tell from his tone – the same tone with which a person would say, "You're a supporter of terrorism"" (*We Should* 1). She then goes on to summarise all the stereotypical limitations and negative baggage that being called a feminist carries in Nigeria:

> You hate men, you hate bras, you hate African culture, you think women should always be in charge, you don't wear makeup, you don't shave, you're always angry, you don't have a sense of humor, you don't use deodorant. (*We Should* 2)

Adichie's documented experience might have happened over two decades ago, but the above assumptions still hold true to an extent today in a country gradually shifting out of a highly androcentric, patriarchal worldview.

The gradual evolution from the strongly fixed patriarchal paradigms has benefited largely from the feminist and gender-based advocacies that have been going on over the years. Women were forced to navigate their marginality, while also trying to reassert their right to spaces that their male counterparts had deprived them, both socially and economically. The journey from being objects that could only be seen but not heard, to becoming human beings treated with some level of respect and dignity did not come easily. In literature, the foundation was laid by the first-generation female writers whose primary objective was to address the perennial issue of non-representation and underrepresentation of women both in the society and in the literature of their time. Some of the novels written by African female writers between the 1960s and 1980s revolved around the relegation of women to the margins and the oppressive nature of the highly patriarchal African culture. Pioneer feminists who succeeded in problematising the issue of male domination include Efua Sutherland, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Mariama Ba, Micere Mugo, Nawal El Saadawi, Ifi Amadiume, Catherine Acholonu, Tess Onwueme, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Zaynab Alkali, and a host of others. The authors who I examine in this thesis build on the legacies of these writers and activists.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, for example, chronicles the painful life experiences of Nnu Ego, whose ultimate goal in life was not just to have children, but male children. That is the only way she can be accepted and legitimised in her borrowed space within a man's world. She walks away from a failed marriage to Amatokwu because she is unable to

bear children, and then gets married to Nnaife, who treats her shabbily, despite her acts of having children for him and becoming the breadwinner. In an irony of fate, the children she ends up slaving for decide to prioritise their immediate families instead of taking care of her in her old age, and she dies a heartbroken woman. Likewise, in *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangaremba explores patriarchy and all its evils, presenting women who are hardworking and resilient even in the face of male oppression. Her female character, Tambu, is emotionless when she informs us in the first chapter that she was not sorry when her brother died. A close reading reveals the reason for her dispassionate statement. Her father, her brother, Babamukuru and all the other male characters are flawed in one way or the other. When her brother Nhamo dies, Tambu refuses to shed a tear, given the ill treatment she has received from him. Her mother, Ma'Shingayi's efforts to turn Tambu into a subservient and non-questioning African woman are rebuffed on many occasions. Tambu is sure she does not want to end like her mother, sacrificing her life and existence for patriarchy to survive. Tambu becomes for us a representation of the struggle for female liberation and self-determination. In *So Long a Letter,* Mariama Ba succeeds in drawing her readers' sympathy to Ramatoulaye, her major character. She sacrifices everything for her family and supports her husband, Modou Fall, to keep the home-front only for him to choose to marry Binetou, a girl who is the same age as Ramatoulaye's first daughter, after twenty-five years of his marriage to Ramatoulaye. Unnecessary rivalry is created between the two women, but Ramatoulaye tries her best to handle it very maturely. Modou Fall dies four years after he gets married to Binetou and leaves Ramatoulaye behind to take care of their twelve children. Ba's novel foregrounds the effects of polygamy in African societies and how the women are often the victims of such marriage arrangements.

In all these novels, the unfortunate fate of the woman in highly patriarchal African societies is foregrounded for all to see, and through the effective deployment of the feminist pen, the society is forced to refocus on a burning issue it so conveniently chooses to ignore. Conversely, the vanity of living daily to satisfy patriarchal dictates is also not lost on the female readers, as they get to see their lives mirrored through the stories of other women. Flora Nwapa explains her objective for writing in the following words: "[i]n my work, I try to project a more balanced image of African womanhood. Male authors understandably neglect to point out the positive side of womanhood…" (527). El Saadawi echoes Nwapa's thoughts when she dismisses celebrated Egyptian writer, Naguib Mahfouz's representation of the woman in his literary works as "fundamentally the same since her honour does not go further than an intact hymen and a chaste sexual life" (523). She then concludes that "[m]ost contemporary Arab writers manifest an undisguised hatred towards bold and emancipated women" (524). It is that kind of literature that Lauretta Ngcobo refers to as punitive, oppressive and meant to deprive women of justice (540). For these early feminist writers, writing came with a sense of urgency and responsibility, as they strived to correct the wrong representation of the woman in literature.

But it must be mentioned that these pioneer female writers and critics had their own view about what feminism should be, especially in an African context, and this echoed in their works. They believed in being recognised just as much as the men were and enjoying the same privileges men enjoyed in the society. But coming to a consensus on what feminism meant to every one of them was impossible, as some of these writers and critics still surrender to influences of religion and tradition, especially when it relates to sex and gender roles. Some of them believed that the Western approaches to female emancipation were not applicable to Africa, and there was a need to adapt other forms of activism to accommodate the African culture.

Emecheta makes this point when she says that the fixation on sex and sexuality in the West is un-African. In her estimation, sex is a part of life, almost a negligible part, and whatever pleasure one derives from it can also be derived from a productive and very successful career. She argues that African feminism is free of the shackles of the Western romantic illusions and tends to be more pragmatic, and any claim by Western feminists that they enjoy sex only makes her laugh (554). But the renowned black American feminist, Audre Lorde disagrees with Emecheta, insisting instead that "[t]he erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (53).

Ogundipe-Leslie, in her widely acclaimed publication, *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, warns that feminism "is not a cry for any one kind of sexual orientation… [or] the reversal of gender roles…" (545). Instead, she suggests the adoption of a new acronym, "STIWA", which stands for "Social Transformation Including Women in Africa." She argues that the new term allows her "to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women" (550). In what reads like a clear manifesto of feminism in Africa, she clearly states that feminism is: not penis envy or gender envy; not oppositional to men; not dividing the genders; not parroting of Western women's rhetoric; not opposed to African culture or heritage; and "not a choice between extreme patriarchy on the one hand or hateful separatism from men on the other" (546-47).

It is easy to deduce from their different arguments that what the first generation of African female writers and critics are fighting for is a dismantling of the phallocentric foundation upon which different African societies were established. However, since the institution of patriarchy is built around "one fundamental principle – the social and sexual subordination of

women" (Ngcobo, 540), sex and sexual preferences come up again and again as a topic of discourse. Julia Wood corroborates this while discussing mediated representations of relationships between women and men, when she posits that women are often represented as subject to men's sexual desires. According to her, "[t]he irony of this representation is that the very qualities women are encouraged to develop (beauty, sexiness, passivity, and powerlessness) in order to meet cultural ideals of femininity contribute to their victimization" (36).

In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett opines that the societally defined power-structured relationships tend to favour patriarchy, and a sexual revolution would require bringing an end to traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos that are construed as threatening monogamous marriage, one of which is homosexuality. Collins appears to agree, as she argues that heterosexism and its accompanying ideology of heterosexuality still enjoy a hegemonic position in the society, and "[s]ocietal norms that install heterosexuality as the only way to be normal still hold sway" (*Black Sexual Politics* 37). To break away from this kind of censorship, everything about sex and sexual preferences must be put on the table for discussion, if there would ever be the kind of freedom that women desire. The ubiquitous portrayal of heteronormative sexual relationships in African literature only further reechoes what Millett and Collins refer to as a model of sexual politics, in which societally defined power-structured relationships tend to both favour and reinforce patriarchy. These perennial societal codes often manifest themselves in African literature, as most African writers willingly or unwillingly find themselves upholding the status quo, thereby further propagating the ideals of patriarchy. But, just as Millett observes, a sexual revolution would require bringing an end to traditional sexual inhibitions and taboos that are construed as threatening monogamous marriage and the nuclear family.

One thing that is consistent across the three primary texts that I am examining is their exploration of marginalised sexualities and sexual experiences in a way that is both revolutionary and transgressive. A close inquisition into the portrayal of homosexuality in their fiction will unravel some important facts about literary production in specific contexts and localities. While Mohammed introduces lesbianism as a novel experience that comes as a totem of freedom in an ultra-conservative northern Nigeria, Adichie construes it as a normative experience which must not be delocalised by Western audiences. For Emezi, they treat sexual silence as the new taboo, moving sexual and trans politics from the margins to the centre.

Same-Sex Relationships in Nigeria

Homosexuality in Nigeria has gone through different rites of passage, starting out as a taboo that must not be mentioned among humans, to the current stage where it is an open secret between homophiles. But one thing that has remained consistent between its earliest stage and the present is the fact that it is considered as an alien concept which is often blamed on the incursion of Western civilisation against the pristine Nigerian culture. The wider sentiments of disapproval among many Nigerians stem from the pervasiveness of Christianity and Islam in the country, as both religions outrightly condemn same-sex relationships. Based on its full understanding of this, and in a bid to gain political capital, the then government of President Goodluck Jonathan passed the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in 2014, prohibiting gay relationships in Nigeria. The law was widely considered a welcome development in the country, but it also conditioned human rights concerns, as offenders were liable to imprisonment for up to 14 years because of their sexual preferences.

However, Nigeria is not the only country in Africa that outlaws same-sex relationships. More recently, the Ugandan parliament passed a legislation that criminalises homosexuality in all

its different forms, with the punishment for "aggravated homosexuality" being life imprisonment. While the West outrightly condemns such legislation across African countries, it is often weaponised by African politicians to gain political capital, as such fundamentalist positions are often celebrated by the heterosexual majority of their populations. But then, has homosexuality always been alien to the African culture? The historian Marc Epprecht strongly disagrees. He argues instead, that earlier anthropological studies reveal that sexual acts between men, and female-female marriages were popular among the Basotho of Lesotho, while same-sex sexuality is widely alluded to throughout Africa south of the Sahara. While discussing Ifi Amadiume's seminal work, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*, Guarav Desai says that the institution of woman-to-woman marriages in precolonial Nnobi only suggests the existence of gender and sexual fluidity in Africa before the advent of colonialism (740).

The arguments about the presence or absence of homosexuality in precolonial Africa have raged on over the last few decades. And given the highly censored and conservative environment that defines most African societies, it manifests as both absence and silence in its literature, even in the fiction of leading feminist thought leaders and activists. Desai insists that this blindness on the part of authors and critics is a phenomenon that requires more scrutiny (737), insisting instead, that in some African contexts, it was not homosexuality that was inherited from the West but rather a more regulatory homophobia (742). Where the issue of same-sex relationships appears in African fiction, Chris Dunton maintains that it remains monothematic and the homosexual subject is usually ascribed a restricted and predictable role in the narrative design (727). Daniel Vignal provides a reason for this:

> For the majority of [African Writers], homophilia is exclusively a deviation introduced by colonialists or their descendants; by outsiders of all kinds: Arabs, French, English, metis, and so on. It is difficult for them to think homophilia might be the act of a black African (74-5).

Dunton agrees with Vignal when he asserts that "[t]he exclusive attribution of homosexual activity to the West is equally commonplace in more substantial African literature" (729). It must therefore be emphasised that African, and indeed Nigerian, novels which highlight same-sex relationships are usually transgressive, rather than stereotypical. This is why this particular research is important, as it interrogates three fictional works by Nigerian authors that present homosexuality as a critical part of their narrative design.

While it is important to highlight what happens in its literature, it is also imperative to document recent developments in the Nigerian society. Lately, same-sex relationships in Nigeria have begun to assume a certain level of normativity, contrary to what used to obtain in the past. The consumerist culture in Nigeria has brought about a pervasiveness of same-sex relationships portrayed in Western media on TV screens both in the urban and rural areas. This is further amplified by social media, as we have instances of Nigerian social media influencers who identify as cross-dressers and closet homosexuals, having large followings on their different platforms. While this can be explained away as some form of curiosity on the part of the predominantly heteronormative followers, it raises questions about the possibility of having more closet homosexuals than people would readily care to admit. Among some of the social media influencers are Bobrisky (Okuneye Idris Olanrewaju), who was born male but now identifies as female; and James Brown (James Chukwueze Obialor), a popular cross-dresser who is popularly referred to as the African Princess by their followers and was once remanded in prison over an alleged public display of affection with members of same-sex in 2021. It must be mentioned,

however, that no one has been convicted for homosexuality in Nigeria, despite the underground gay clubs and the public display of virtue signalling that characterises homosexuals in Nigeria.

On the above count, there appear to be some parallels between Nigeria and Anglophone Caribbean countries. Rosalind King points out that there is a mandate of discretion in Caribbean societies, and while there are laws that criminalise sodomy in some of the countries, those laws are rarely officially enforced (67). She further states that:

> It is a situation in which many people "know" someone is a homosexual though the fact is not openly acknowledged. People "know" the "secret" without being told, through any combination of factors such as behaviors, speech, or dress. (King, 64)

The influence of colonisation cannot be divorced from how these former colonies respond in time and space, to the question of same-sex relationships. Former Spanish colonies appear to be more flexible around the issue, compared to former British colonies that are more antagonistic of gay relationships. One thing all these societies have in common, however, is the burden that sexual minorities face while trying to navigate their sexual 'Otherness' among predominantly heteronormative people.

Context of Authors

The three primary authors being used for this research have been carefully chosen to represent the three different categories of Nigerian literary writers we have today. Razinat Mohammed holds a PhD in Feminist Literary Criticism, and is the author of *A Love like a Woman's and other Stories* (2006); *Habiba* (2013); and *The Travails of a First Wife* (2015). She also co-edited *The Markas: An Anthology of Literary Works on Boko Haram* (2019), with Tanure Ojaide, Abubakar Othman and Hyeladzira Balami. Not so much has been written about Mohammed as an author, but given the dearth of female literary figures from northern Nigeria, she represents a very

important demographic group, as she helps us see the world through the woman in an ultra-conservative northern Nigeria. She will serve the dual purpose of analysing how writers resident in Nigeria address the issue of homosexuality, while also mirroring how the women of a very conservative northern region approach issues of sexuality and patriarchy. Akwaeke Emezi is the author of *Freshwater* (2018), *Pet* (2019), *The Death of Vivek Oji* (2020), *Dear Senthuran* (2021), *Mazel* (2021), *Bitter* (2022), *You Made a Fool of Death with Your Beauty* (2022), and their first collection of poems, *Content Warning: Everything* (2022). I will be interrogating Emezi as a Nigerian emigrant writer who does not experience the same authorial censorship that a Nigerian writer resident in Nigeria experiences.

Finally, I will look at Chimamanda Adichie, a writer who needs no introduction. Seen as a Chinua Achebe reincarnation, she is the author of *Purple Hibiscus* (2003); *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006); *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009); *One World: A Global Anthology of Short Stories* (2009), co-edited with Jhumpa Lahiri; *Americana* (2014); *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014); *Imitation* (2015); *The Shivering* (2016); *The Arrangements* (2016); *Dear Ijeawele: A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017); *Notes on Grief* (2021); and *Mama's Sleeping Scarf* (2023), writing under the pen name, Nwa Grace-James. Seeing that she is a writer that is widely accepted both locally and internationally, I would be analysing her construction of gender from the perspective of someone who successfully bestrides both worlds without losing any of her audiences.

Method & Methodology

To underscore the construction of gender and sexuality in the works of the three authors, I will be doing a close reading and literary analyses of their texts. Attention will be paid to how they use characterisation, narrative techniques and other literary devices to either tacitly or

overtly communicate their feminist agenda and interpret sexuality. I will also be doing inter-textual and comparative analyses of the three fictional works to see if there are any similarities, influences or significant contrasts. I would be situating each author's work in their respective sociopolitical milieus to foreground how society directly influences what writers say or choose not to say in their works. By closely examining the differences between African fiction published in Africa and African fiction published outside Africa, I hope to highlight the impact location plays in determining the kind of feminism that is obtainable in each society.

In Chapter 1, I present a background to the research, reviewing issues of feminism from the early days till contemporary times. Chapter 2 reviews the issue of patriarchy in northern Nigeria and feminism's transgressive response, through the inquisitive eyes of Razinat Mohammed. In Chapter 3, I discuss Adichie's feminist vision, particularly with respect to her construction of gender and sexuality, and also paying close attention to her treatment of marriage as an enabler of patriarchal domination. In Chapter 4, Akwaeke Emezi's avant-garde reconstruction of the Igbo cosmology is extensively discussed, as I pay attention to how they handle the motif of the *ogbanje*, a reincarnated being, who also doubles as a trans person living in an Igbo society. I also examine similarities between Adichie and Emezi, especially with respect to views on marriage and the Nigerian culture.

Chapter Two: Where the Gods Dread to Tread: Gender and Sexuality in Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba*

Any reader of Razinat Mohammed's eponymous novel, *Habiba,* is forced to come face to face with the issue of child marriage as it obtains in the Islamic religion. In the novel, the author masterfully foregrounds some of the challenges that the girl child faces in northern Nigeria, as she tries to navigate a culture and religion that subordinate her to the desires of patriarchy. With a promising academic future before her, Habiba unwittingly sets herself up for a total reversal of fortune when she escapes from her mother's house. Her new sojourn in her father's house is supposed to bring her some reprieve from all the harsh treatments she experiences in the hands of her mother, but then, it also comes with its many negative side effects. At the young age of 15, she is forced into marrying someone old enough to be her grandfather, because of poverty.

While reading the novel, one can easily draw parallels between it and Buchi Emecheta's highly celebrated novel, *The Joys of Motherhood.* While the latter tells the story of Nnu Ego, a naïve young woman whose ultimate ambition in life is to have children for her husband, Nnaife, *Habiba* foregrounds the many vicissitudes of girl-child marriage in northern Nigeria. In both novels, one recurring motif is the pernicious nature of patriarchy as an established institution in Africa, as we find both Nnu Ego and Habiba dealing with the different shades of victimhood that women are exposed to. But while Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* can be classified as a typical narrativising of victimhood that early works of pioneer feminist writers are known for, Mohammed's novel appears as a bridge between the conciliatory feminist vision of the first-generation feminist writers and the radical approach of contemporary feminist writers. While the earlier feminist writers envisioned a world where women would be accepted and treated as humans, they only managed to highlight the plight of women in their works, without necessarily

providing a solution to the overarching problem of patriarchy. In contrast, radical feminism not only highlights the problem, but also provides radical solutions to end the patriarchal hegemony and the perennial weight of victimhood which the woman is forced to carry through generations.

The Individuality of Female Suffering

One major motif in the novel is the individual nature of female suffering. Every woman, no matter how old or young, has a burden that she is entitled to carry and which no other female may be able to comprehend, no matter how similar their shared burdens may appear. Habiba is a thirteen-year-old girl who is unfortunate to have a fully developed body like that of a young adult. Because of this, she is made to carry the weighty responsibility of being accountable for all the students in her class and even her class teacher. This arrangement leaves Habiba wondering "why responsibilities kept weighing her down as they did" (5). She nonetheless has no choice as the teacher does not seek her consent before assigning the role to her. There is however a downside to the whole arrangement, as her mother, Kande, also scolds her for coming home late every day. This makes the young Habiba grow up with fear as a close companion. She is afraid of failing in her responsibilities at school while, at the same time, perpetually nursing the devastating fear of her mother's violent disapproval. Overwhelmed by these polar demands, she decides to run away. This leaves her with just one option – going back to her father who had divorced her mother and abandoned them when she was still a seven-year-old girl.

Having been exposed to that life of bearing responsibilities right from an early age, she feels that she owes her younger sister Ummi the responsibility of seeing to her welfare. This makes her take Ummi along with her as they both return to their father in Pompomari:

> Habiba had to take a chance on her life and Ummi's. She could not bear to be separated from her little sister. Though it was true that Ummi had a better life

> living with Kande, their mother, Habiba was not one to risk the life of her sister in the hands of a woman such as Kande. (16)

This life of many responsibilities is not peculiar to Habiba alone, though. Akachi Ezeigbo maintains that most women in Nigeria are overwhelmed by the responsibilities in their lives which are either created by society or themselves or both. This impossible task of living up to these responsibilities is not helped by the fact that it is contextualised in a culture that teaches women that they are inferior to their male counterparts (5). Ezeigbo further points out that the "responsibilities and limitations of being female in a male-dominated society are realities that are constantly in the consciousness of every Nigerian woman" (xv). Continuing, she says that because she is raised in a culture which emphasises strict role differentiation, especially in adult life,

> the female is always reminded of her so-called natural roles as a wife and a mother. These roles saddle her with the responsibilities of producing, nurturing children and taking care of the home. Right from childhood, she is constantly reminded of these duties so that by the time she reaches adulthood, she comes to accept them as her raison d'etre. A woman who goes through life without experiencing both wifehood and motherhood is regarded as unnatural or unfortunate. (xv)

While I agree with Ezeigbo's position above, it is important to state that motherhood in most African contexts is not considered complete until the woman has given birth to a son or to as many sons as possible. In the Igbo tradition of South-Eastern Nigeria, a woman's marriage is said to have been secured only when she gives birth to a male child. This is what brings about the desperation among women who do not have male children for their husbands. Apart from the psychological pressure that they are put under, society and, most often, their families create overwhelming pressure for them that frustrates them in their marriages and makes them want to seek desperate alternatives.

The quest for a male child is a very dominant motif in *Habiba*. Thinking about women who have only male children and are praying to have female children, Kande concludes that they are stupid and then wonders what they could possibly want with female children. For her, there is nothing "more wonderful in this world than to give birth to a male child and be loved and spoilt by both your husband and his mother" (7). There is almost this willingness to exterminate the girl-child as an unwanted sub-species of the homo sapiens, in line with patriarchy's worldview about the primacy of male children. Aware that they barely have a chance of survival in Kande's house, Habiba and Ummi leave in search of acceptance and a sense of belonging. If the reader ever had any doubt about Kande's reaction to her daughters leaving her house and embarking on a journey to the unknown, Mohammed informs us that:

> Kande heard the girls as they tiptoed out of the house but made no move to restrain them. She figured they had their own lives to live and their own destinies to define; after all, every woman was in this alone since a mother's love or hate would come to nothing in the end. (15)

Despite all her motherly affection, Kande finally resigns herself to the fact that women have their destinies already spelt out for them and there is no amount of effort that will change that. By highlighting the patriarchal notion that the burden of every woman's existence is personal, Mohammed foregrounds the possible dangers inherent in women who choose to live in isolation, instead of rallying together as a community to confront their common enemy. It must be emphasised that Kande's action is both unnatural and sociopathic, as mothers are known to be highly protective of their children. But this motherly affection is often subordinated to the religious and cultural practice of the almajiri system in the north, where young children are abandoned to their fate and allowed to navigate through their late childhood and early teenage years away from the protective arms of their parents. But as the story progresses, we see how

vicious Kande's patriarchal thought pattern becomes, as Habiba and Ummi are exposed to many avoidable problems.

Habiba's decision to leave her mother's house and rejoin her father is fraught with its attendant risks as she considers it a dive that may end up in a soft-landing or crash-landing. However, she is willing to take the plunge despite the risk of rejection and ill-treatment at the hands of her father. When Ummi reminds her that their father, Saleh, may not want them after all, Habiba exclaims in a tone that speaks more about fear than conviction: "[h]e will want us! Do you understand that? He must accept us because we are his children!" (17). Luckily for the two of them, Saleh welcomes them with open arms and takes them to his house where they get to meet his new wife, Sadia, his other children and their overbearing grandmother, Hamsatu. Their acceptance into Saleh's household is however a temporary reprieve from the looming fate that will soon befall them, for just as Mohammed apprises us, they share a similar fate with the cow whose photo was pasted on Saleh's kiosk.

> The cow […] must be just as unfortunate as themselves to be moving around with that bell announcing its captivity and bondage to the entire world to see just as they were coming with tiny invisible bells strung to their feet and about to herald their woes of existence to the world. (19)

The above passage foreshadows the many woes that lie just ahead of them simply because they are girls. Omonubi-McDonnell is very profound when she points us to the assertion by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie that the African woman has:

> [s]ix mountains on her back: one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neo-colonialism?); the second is from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal, etc.; the third is her backwardness (neo-colonialism?); the fourth is man; the fifth is her colour, her race; and the sixth is herself. (16-17)

These mountains – akin to Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality – perennially weigh her down and she is frequently a victim of fate and circumstances often

orchestrated by men. While women's existence is often begrudged by established patriarchy, their roles are always defined for them even before they learn to pronounce their own names. They are the perpetual fetchers of water and hewers of wood, the very category of people that are always condemned to work while the men indulge themselves in any object of their fancy. It is a society that has no special assignment for boys. When reading the narration of the happenings in Saleh's house, we learn that the "children were up and the girls knew just what they had to do. Habiba was to begin the preparation for breakfast while her sisters were to sweep the compound" (55). Saleh's sons have no responsibilities whatsoever, and all they do is play around the compound until the food is ready. This faulty socialisation of male children comes with its consequences, as they grow up feeling entitled and with very little control of their emotions, compared to the highly disciplined lifestyle that the women imbibe from childhood.

One major challenge with the situation of the women is the fact that they have been made to believe that their plight was ordained by God. Omonubi-McDonnell points out that women in Nigeria were indoctrinated into a non-confrontational, subservient feminine way of Western behaviour sanctioned by the various religions (14). Women are made to see themselves as fortunate when they end up marrying a man who can provide for their basic needs, even if their emotional needs are treated as secondary. We are informed that Maimuna, the elder sister of Saleh, "was actually content with her life as a second wife to such a man as Hashimu who was well-respected in the society. He was a good husband to his wives" (90). Discussing Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics,* Rosemarie Tong maintains that patriarchal ideology "is so powerful that men are usually able to secure the apparent consent of the very women they oppress" (49). However, this kind of consent must be placed in proper context, and to do this, we would turn to Antonio Gramsci's explication of consent and how it works in a bourgeois hegemony. It is often

passive and non-critical, as opposed to the “active, participatory and philosophical" consent that operates in liberal spaces (Forgacs, 218). This kind of consent in a highly patriarchal society operates within the dual perspective of force and consent, with force being on the other end of the continuum, and women are often whipped into line using force, whenever they appear to withhold or withdraw their consent. Tong further identifies the academy, the church and the family as institutions that justify and reinforce women’s subordination to men, making most women internalise some sense of inferiority to men (49-50).

Central to this subscription to social inequality is the loss of both economic and political power on the part of the women. Ezeigbo points to colonialism and the propagation of Islam and Christianity as contributors to the pauperisation of Nigerian women and their displacement from their earlier heights of economic and political power (xvii). Extending this argument, Bahadur Tejani insists that women in conservative forms of Islam have come to accept sacrifice, economic dependence and hard work as their lot (162). This is the image he believes that Driss Chraibi projects in his work of fiction, *Heirs to the Past*. The women under the yoke of religion therefore are women who never reach their fullest potentials as they have so much locked within them that cannot be expressed. They are dreams unrealised; horizons unexplored- inhibited by religion and exploited by patriarchy.

Most of the women characters in *Habiba* seem to exemplify this unquestioning acceptance of the primacy of the men above women and the need to strive towards the ultimate goal of living for man’s pleasure. In Kande, Sadia, Maimuna, and Hamsatu, we find women who are satisfied with their patriarchally defined fate – oppressed, depressed, used, abused, voiceless, powerless, emasculated and prevented from becoming. Sadia, who we see as a different woman from the traditional lot, is conquered in the end when she starts questioning her own initial

condemnation of Zubairu's actions. Having been without Saleh for some weeks, she faces some difficult time trying to fend for her children and this forces her to come cap in hand to Zubairu's house, begging for a means of survival. This is another practical case of economic powerlessness upon which the propagation of patriarchy is predicated.

While Habiba is made to face the challenge of a marriage she does not understand, Kande is exposed to unfavourable experiences in marriage which make her try her best to expunge every memory of her ill-fated marriage to Saleh. Although she appears wiser than Saleh in many instances, religious and cultural censorship of her voice ensures that we only get to read about her thoughts without her voicing them. The stifling of the female voice becomes yet another tool of oppression by patriarchy. It is noteworthy that, as much as Habiba's younger sister, Ummi, feels very strongly about Habiba's predicament, she cannot fully understand it. Inasmuch as she wants to identify with her pain, Ummi discovers that it is locked away from her like a wall she cannot transcend. As Mohammed informs us, "[s]he wanted to share in the pains that Habiba was going through but knew how impossible that was" (168).

Of Patriarchal Women and Renegades

The patriarchy's most potent weapon against women is not the brutal force that it exerts on them. On the contrary, it is the transforming of women into willing slaves through religious conventions, cultural beliefs and dogmas. In her essay, "Putting them in their place: "respectable" and "unrespectable" women in Zimbabwean gender studies", Chipo Hungwe argues that the notion of respectability and unrespectability serves a patriarchal agenda. Women are only respectable as long as they occupy the space given to them by patriarchy. While some things are considered unrespectable by normal patriarchal standards, they assume a status of respectability when they help to advance male interests. A good instance is the case of

prostitution (or sex work) which is normally considered disgraceful, but which suddenly assumed a legitimate and plausible status during the Mau Mau struggle in Kenya. This was because these prostitutes helped in the abduction and sometimes, killing of the African policemen who served colonial interests. These same women however assumed their original status as disgraceful women immediately after the struggle was over (41).

This socio-psychological space created by patriarchy for women is surely not an establishment that is self-sufficient. It is an establishment that needs a lot of support in the face of dissenting and opposing voices of some women who find themselves questioning the many yokes placed on them by patriarchy. This kind of support comes in the form of repressive actions and punitive measures put in place by patriarchy to whip such women into place. However, in addition to the efforts of men who see themselves as custodians of patriarchy, we have the actions of some patriarchal women who consider it their utmost responsibility to see that their fellow women do not rock the boat. They are people who, having been psychologically defeated, have accepted patriarchy as the status quo and go to any length in opposing women who are bold enough to have a dissenting opinion. As a reward for their relentless efforts, patriarchy gives them some form of recognition, power or whatever other incentive it may deem fit. Hungwe opines that some women are actively involved in this kind of policing. According to her,

> [a]s is usually the case in patriarchal social structures, women who oppress, demonise and marginalize other women usually have some small amount of power bestowed on them by patriarchal structures; or they benefit from certain patriarchal practices…(45).

Saleh's mother, Hamsatu, is a very clear representation of the patriarchal woman who considers it her utmost responsibility to preserve the patriarchal institution. Her commitment to the preservation of patriarchy is informed by religious and cultural considerations. In return,

patriarchy bestows upon her that status of "Big Mother", a dictator whose words and actions are backed up by an effeminate son whose indecisiveness and constant shying away from responsibilities turn out to be his idiosyncratic way of rubber-stamping his mother's many excesses. Sadia herself is the questioning woman who does not agree with Hamsatu's many ideologies and worldview. She however is constrained by an overwhelming need to protect her marriage. Despite her realisation that "they were all victims of the old woman's hideous manipulations", she still finds herself blaming Saleh for being weak (43). Mohammed informs us that:

> As much as she would want answers to these questions, she blamed him for being weak. His weakness had encouraged the old woman to continue to decide for him. She had asked him severally [sic] in the past why it was that he allowed his mother [to] control his life, his answer had been that the Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon Him) wishes that every child remains in the good books of his parents, especially the mother, in order to receive the blessings of Allah (SWT) and Al-Janna (paradise). (43-44)

As plausible as Saleh's reason for being overtly subservient to his mother sounds, Sadia no longer sees any sense in that explanation. On the contrary, she "believed that a child could correct his parents if they were ignorant of the truth and were misleading their children" (44). The author, Mohammed, uses the character of Sadia to make an authorial comment and give us her own perspective on obedience to parents. In her appraisal of the Islamic religion, she posits that obedience should not be blind and uninformed. Instead, it should be based on a clear understanding of what is required, and a clear justification based on morality and a good sense of judgment. Leading us further in this line of thought, Mohammed apprises us that Sadia:

> believed that as much as Allah (SWT) wishes that we respect our parents, He would blame us for standing in wait and looking the other way while our parents did things wrongly. It is our responsibility to protect our own parents from eternal damnation when they use their powers or influence to oppress people in total obedience to them. (44)

Reading between the lines, we can see that Mohammed does not approve of this practice of girl-child marriage. While she agrees that parents should be obeyed, she also believes that parents can wrongly use their religious authority to command respect and obedience even on issues that are against moral ethics. In such situations, instead of blind obedience, she calls for a revolt based on a pressing need to save such parents from damnation.

While Sadia questions Hamsatu's excesses, she is constrained by a religion that insists she must not question her husband's decisions. But then, that does not make her abandon her inquisitiveness. Mohammed uses her character to appraise some of the long-held opinions about the superiority of men to women – all the more, given the fact that women are often the ones left with the consequences of the actions or inactions of the men.

> She wondered what it was that goes into the heads of men that allowed them [to] abandon their responsibilities at times when they were most needed. Why do they always forget that Allah (SWT) will never saddle one with a responsibility that one cannot contain? In her mind, she failed to see the correlation between physical and mental superiority that men often claimed over women. (47)

All her questions, however, remain unanswered as the plot unfolds. Meanwhile, it is fundamental to state that Mohammed uses her to give us an entirely different perspective on the many patriarchal excesses that are excused under claims of religion.

Hamsatu's fears are informed by a patriarchal society that has come to enthrone motherhood as the ultimate end of womanhood. Having lost five of her children to the cold hands of death, Hamsatu is left with an only son, Saleh, and a daughter, Maimuna. Her desire to perpetuate her husband's name therefore drives her to extreme measures to ensure that her son begets male children that will carry on the family name. Mohammed remarks:

> [h]er fears had been that her husband's name would terminate if he did not have sons in the lineage to carry on his family name. This had been her fear

> over the years that had been growing up. It had pushed her to get Kande to marry the young Saleh, then only seventeen. (7)

This same fear turns her into an unfeeling and an uncaring old woman whose motherly emotions are subdued by an ultimate need to perpetuate the family name. Saleh's first wife, Kande, is frustrated out of Saleh's house because of Hamsatu's ill treatment and unfriendly disposition. After her first two children turn out to be girls, Kande faces a very cruel treatment when she has her third child who also turns out to be a girl. When the baby dies and Saleh informs Hamsatu about it, her response is so inhumane, it leaves one wondering if she ever felt the pangs of childbirth. In an atmosphere that should be filled with mourning, she finds a way of indulging her sense of humour. Mohammed describes the encounter in the following lines:

> "[y]ou can't be serious. You mean she wailed then died and then continued to wail?" The smile on her face was like the provoked expression on the face of a wild cat. Whenever she made an effort to avoid uproar, she smiled that sort of smile.
>
> "No, Mother. I mean, she cried and died."
>
> The old woman considered the matter briefly before she responded. If she understood him well, he was trying to tell her that the little imp born yesterday was dead. "Cheer up", she said, "it is for the best, that is to say, if the child is truly dead. God the giver has taken back His gift. What can we do about that? It was a frail gift anyway." She considered his face sharply and quickly added, "And where is Kande?"
>
> "In her room, crying."
>
> "Over what?" she screamed. (13)

Hamsatu not only mocks the death of the girl child, but she also forbids Kande from mourning her. The last respect that Kande owes the little girl is deprived her, and this experience is so unbearable for her, she asks Saleh for a divorce. Hamsatu and Saleh display some kind of strange attitude towards the child's death to the point that Kande "had a queer feeling it would gladden them both" (9).

For his own part, Saleh is bound by his understanding of Islamic religion to obey Hamsatu in every situation, whether right or wrong. It nonetheless turns out that she makes him do the wrong things and take ill-informed decisions in most of the cases, exposing his family to great risk in the process. She is behind his divorcing his first wife, Kande, and this takes its own toll on Saleh's development as he is forced to run a home in which he has little or no say in the happenings. His overtly subservient nature turns out to be his albatross as Hamsatu makes decisions that endanger him and his family. Her negotiation with Mallam Zubairu on the marriage of Habiba is one process that turns out to be irreversible even after she is dead.

There is some form of paranormal complicity in the ultimate fall of Saleh, as his first ever attempt at standing up to his mother comes with seemingly terrible repercussions. Hamsatu dies immediately when she is disobeyed by her son for the very first time. This creates a burden on Saleh's conscience as he starts wishing he could move back the hands of time, if only to change things. It is noteworthy that even in death, her dream of keeping patriarchy alive does not die. If anything, her death hastens the fulfillment of her ultimate ambition, as the debts incurred in the process of hospitalising and burying her make Saleh perpetually indebted to Zubairu and this in turn makes him impotent against Zubairu's evil schemes.

Hamsatu finds a literary corollary in Mainini, Tambu's mother in Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions.* The difference however lies in the fact that, while Mainini considers herself and other women helpless in the face of established patriarchy, Hamsatu sees it as her responsibility to enforce patriarchal dictates. Mainini is the passive patriarchal police who subtly encourages submission by the things she says and does. For Hamsatu's part, she does not seem to envision a world free from the yoke of patriarchy. So instead of fighting it, she rather fights those who attempt to fight or oppose it. She and Habiba are two women on two extremes of the divide.

While Hamsatu is the custodian of patriarchy, Habiba is the new generational woman who believes in education as the roadmap to the future. Somewhere in between is a Sadia that knows what should be but is held in bondage by economic and social considerations. Kande is the defeated victim who has been poisoned by patriarchy's evil chalice and becomes both cynical and despondent beyond the point of recuperation; she ends up on the other side of the curve like her oppressors, unfeeling and apathetic towards her children. For Zubairu's wives, they are the unwilling conformists who are forced to abide by whatever decision their husband takes because their religion and culture forbid them from having a recognised opinion. While Hamsatu can pass for the patriarchal woman, Habiba is the renegade who seeks salvation from the yoke of patriarchy.

Sex as Protest and Metaphor

The victory of patriarchy and its perpetuation has always been supported covertly by women's and men's inability or unwillingness to challenge the status quo. This conscious effort to accommodate all the ills done against women make them cultivate a culture of silence in the face of unbearable oppression and maltreatment. Just as Ezeigbo believes, the silencing of women was encouraged by their own tendency to accept the status quo and their lack of political will to change the situation (15). A true attempt at changing the status quo will start with a deconstruction of age-long beliefs, myths, and ideologies and a recreation of new myths that are favourable to the woman and guarantee her survival in a grossly male-dominated society. This will also have to go hand in hand with a laser-focused political will and advocacy towards altering the material conditions in which people live. It is important to emphasise that the deconstruction and reconstruction of myths most likely will not be done by male authors who are actually beneficiaries of patriarchy. It has to be done by female writers who are not afraid to

speak out against oppression. Ojo-Ade brings some ray of hope for the woman writer in the following words:

> Fortunately, taboos die- though slowly- with the times. With the new, warped, so-called luminaries emerging from the colonial roots, even the female deaf and dumb have acquired a voice. It is a voice of confusion, of confrontation, of commitment. The men have had their say; they continue to have it. It is now the women's turn. (*Female Writers* 159)

Setting an agenda for women writers in this new century, Carol Boyce Davies warns that the "social and historical realities of African women's lives must be considered in any meaningful examination of women in African literature and of writings by African women writers" (561). Going further in this agenda setting, Iniobong I. Uko emphasises that the African woman has a duty to both appropriate and repudiate African history and culture, together with other phenomena and practices, like religious beliefs, that relegate the woman to the background (82). In doing this, the female writer will have to bear Annette Kolodny's words in mind about bridging "the gap between the world as we found it and the world as we wanted it to be" (1). This new world has to move away from the logocentric leanings of earlier writings both by male and female authors, while at the same time, deemphasising the phallocentric tendencies. In this new world, the woman would be recognised first of all as a person, and not as a sex object, a reproductive machine or any other patriarchal colouration assigned to the phenomenon of womanhood.

Uko stresses that, contrary to the societal construct that sets motherhood and procreation as the woman's major sources of fulfillment,

> [c]ontemporary African women are seeking new avenues for self-fulfilment, arguing that it is now untenable, obnoxious and unacceptable that womanhood is validated only through motherhood and procreation, where procreation implies the male-child principle (86).

One of these avenues is the relegation of sexual relations with men to the background while emphasising the strength of the woman in the face of difficult situations. This reconstruction of sexual relations is for obvious reasons. Bruce Kokopeli and George Lakey identify patriarchy as shaping men's sexuality. They are often preoccupied with dominating women sexually in the form of rape or sexual encounters that underscore their masculinity. This is why they are concerned with the size of the male organs. Kokopeli and Lakey opine that men "want to have large penises because size equals power, the ability to make a woman "really feel it." The imagery of violence is close to the surface here, since women find penis size irrelevant to sexual genital pleasure" (509). Since sexuality signifies domination for the man, new female writings attempt to deconstruct heterosexual relationships while encouraging homoerotic and homosexual relationships, as well as a more centered, profound discussion of women's sexuality in heterosexual relationships.

Mohammed's literary work ends with Habiba entering into a lesbian relationship with another of Zubairu's wives, Rabi. This homosexual plot does not diminish the experience of the two women. Judith Butler decries the tendency to attribute a failed, damaged or abject gender to homosexuals. She argues that there is a non-causal and non-reductive connection between sexuality and gender, hence the absolute commitment of patriarchal societies to regulating sexuality through the policing and shaming of gender (*Bodies* 182). In such situations, gay men are called feminine while lesbians are called masculine. A reversal of gender ascription paints a very negative picture of the people involved and there is a homophobic terror that comes with such negative colourations.

Tong informs us that, based on Ann Koedt's essay, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm", radical-cultural feminists in the Global North of the 1970s to 1990s believed that if a woman

wanted to be a true feminist, she must become a lesbian. This would free her "consciousness from the false idea that she is deviant, abnormal, sick, crazy, or bad because she enjoys sex with women not men" (70). Although this strain of feminism is no longer dominant, some of its tenets still randomly appear in the works of feminist authors, as they emphasise sexual and reproductive organs as tools of oppression by the patriarchal male figure. In line with this, Shulamith Firestone advocates for an end of the biological family and a banishment of traditional reproductive roles that require women to submit themselves to natural reproduction. On the contrary, she encourages that artificial reproduction should be explored instead (197-200). An exploration of artificial reproduction will eradicate the need for genital sex. This in turn will create room for a discovery of the many pleasures inherent in other kinds of sexual activities from anal to oral sex, then to sexual relations with members of the same and opposite sex.

Habiba and Rabi, Zubairu's second wife, seem to adopt Firestone's advice in detail. Given the fact that, in the patriarchal worldview, a woman is defeated whenever she allows a man to dictate her sexual needs and tie her down with childbirth, they both seek an avenue to escape this state of perpetual defeat. On her own part, Habiba "knew that she needed to assume a state of mind to keep her sanity. A disposition that would invariably compel Zubairu to send her away was what she had to work on finding" (169). Poised for a revolt, she willingly embraces sexual relations with Rabi, her co-wife, in defiance of all that patriarchy stands for. Mohammed informs us that:

> [i]n the room, on a large bed, under the sheets, two heads stuck out, each plaited in different styles. One was suckling the other and the groaning sounds and cries of ecstacy [sic], mingled with the thundering outside, provided the needed balm to their desires. In this liaison, there was no young and no old. The young whose chest flowed with milk from Mother Nature satisfied the thirst of the old (173).

The precursor to this sexual liaison between Habiba and Rabi is the former's childbirth and the events after that. Her son, Abba, refuses to indulge in the common ritual of suckling a mother's breast. This makes her breasts carry excess milk. Rabi offers to help squeeze the excess milk out of her breasts and this she does until the fourth attempt when the breast milk spurts on her body and creates a libidinal sensation in her. She indulges this new feeling and finds that Habiba herself is also drawn by these primitive instincts. As we are informed, the "encouraging groans from [Habiba] had helped foster the liaison until they had finally discovered the comfort of the bed" (174).

It is important to state at this point that Mohammed's deployment of euphemistic expressions to narrate the homosocial relationship between Habiba and Rabi before unravelling the lesbian plot is a way of avoiding harsh censorship. She is a Nigerian writer resident in Nigeria, a country where same-sex relationships are criminalised, and offenders are liable to imprisonment. Furthermore, she is a Muslim writer based in northern Nigeria, where this kind of homoerotic behaviour is outlawed and can be severely punished by their religious police. Nonetheless, from her portrayal of this lesbian experience, she seems to be canvassing for a new world where patriarchy's power is taken away by a reconstruction of the matrix of sexuality. But it has to be done under the cover of childbirth and suckling the newborn, with the weather providing a perfect distraction to those who may likely have been on their tails.

If literature is indeed a reflection of the society, it suggests that these libidinal desires of women who desire women may exist in northern Nigeria. However, it cannot be openly acknowledged or indulged, as it would be a direct affront on patriarchy, and the society has been set up to protect such patriarchal hegemonies. This is similar to what obtains in the Caribbean, just as Rosamond King informs us. Because of a similar legislation against same-sex

relationships in the Caribbean, the sexuality of women who desire other women is not visible to, or widely acknowledged by, others (97). This phenomenon that thrives under the banner of secrecy opens up a new vista of self-awareness and sexuality, as the women are willing to explore pleasure and satisfaction outside the male patriarchal figure.

The new discovery that Habiba and Rabi could bring mutual satisfaction to each other can be interpreted as victory for womanhood, as they no longer need to depend on the male figure for any form of pleasure. On the contrary, they now seek to use the man to achieve their own ends. They do not mind staying under Zubairu's roof and being taken care of by him, while they pursue their own pleasure. Just like Mohammed says, "[s]ometimes people have to wake up from their slumber and take that position which is rightly theirs. Even the most loved slave desires his freedom someday" (49). She projects a new vision of revolt even when it seems like the woman has been boxed into a corner. For her, lesbianism becomes a viable alternative to forced sex and slavish marriage relationships. This is contrary to Nawal El Sadaawi's call to embrace prostitution as we see in *Woman at Point Zero*. Although Habiba contemplates prostitution as a way of escape from the cursed burden of child marriage that she has been forced to carry, she rather opts for lesbianism as an acceptable way out and a permanent slight on patriarchy. In her opinion, whether it is a forced marriage or a willing offering of her sexuality to other men for a fee, it still amounts to a domination of womanhood by patriarchy just because he can afford it.

Udenta O. Udenta argues that some of the issues relating to the female question revolve around the search for individual identity and path of independent and self-regulated living in a culture determined by male authority (126). For Mohammed, to find this individual identity, the woman does not need to look outwards but inwards, as her ultimate satisfaction lies in herself.

But then, given the kind of institutional backing patriarchy has going for it, it will not be out of place to argue that dethroning it through conventional means is almost impossible. Ojo-Ade asserts that just like

> the near impossible dream of genuine black emancipation in a world where confusion, conflagration and ever-changing complexities and complexes draw people away from a real effort to solve basic problems, female liberation may remain just that, a dream frustrated by harsh, existential realities ("Still a Victim?" 71-72).

This new consciousness of female wholeness is what Mohammed seeks to develop in *Habiba*. She wants a society in which women are still able to find freedom and pleasure, while also regaining control, even though they are still entrapped by the yokes of patriarchy; a society in which women are bold enough to seek their own happiness wherever they can find it. The replacement of the penis becomes a symbol of the victory they have long sought, as they are now able to create their pleasure without a patriarchal agency. Mohammed seems to be suggesting that instead of submitting themselves to the ills of child marriage and other forms of patriarchal oppression, women should seek out ways of making themselves happy without the men. Prostitution itself is not an option in this new world as that will still imply submitting oneself to men's whims and caprices. She rises above Nawal El Saadawi's feminist vision in *Woman at Point Zero* and advises all women to embrace their femaleness and explore their sexuality with fellow women. The surrealistic picture of Mother Nature that Mohammed tries to paint of that sexual encounter between Habiba and Rabi is suggestive of her tacit endorsement of this new ideology. Queer relations and female same-sex desire become her own way of revolting against established patriarchy.

From Habiba's actions, we can rightly deduce that Mohammed wants women to forsake everything else that impinges on their happiness. Habiba's abandonment of her fifteen-month-old

son is even more significant. It signals a rejection of motherhood and all its entrapments. Abba's loud cries and whimpers are not enough to stir the motherly affection in her. Rather, she stays back on the bed with Rabi, indulging herself in a pleasure she had been deprived in her relationship with all men. Rabi, though childless, also embraces lesbianism instead of putting in more effort to get pregnant. From their actions, we can tell that marriage for the woman becomes some kind of bondage which they secretly wish to be free from. Through both women, Mohammed seems to have heeded Flora Nwapa's advice about creating characters that are fulfilled and not weighed down by the shackles of marriage and motherhood (531). The novel ends at this point and the gay experience remains a secret that nobody else finds out, suggesting that Mohammed believes women can enjoy pleasure and freedom even in the face of patriarchy without being punished for it.

As a final point, it is safe to say that Mohammed fails in her attempt to dethrone patriarchy. Her solution to the problem is another problem in itself because, though it gives women sexual choices and an opportunity to indulge their fantasies, it still does not give them the much needed economic, social and political emancipation that will serve as a precursor to all other forms of freedom. Also, by prescribing lesbianism as a way out of the problem, she inadvertently isolates many of her fellow Muslim women whose sensibilities are insulted by the mere mention of lesbianism. By so doing, she creates some more problems, as the very people who hitherto would have been dependable foot soldiers in the clamour for women liberation are unavoidably excluded from the war. This exclusion is borne out of bipolar ideological leanings, one Western and the other, African, which are traceable to the effects of religion and tradition.

Chapter Three – Adichie: Re-envisioning and Reconstructing New Gender Paradigms

A summary of Chimamanda Adichie's worldview on gender and feminism can be found in the following words: "Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice" (*We Should All Be Feminists,* 7). But if we go a little further to discussing the prose of it, she aligns with some of the pioneer African feminists and other feminists of colour around the globe in insisting that black men and women have some experiences that are common to them – like racism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and other social vices that came because of the contact with the West. Ama Ata Aidoo, for instance, dismisses the possibility of having any earth-shaking differences between what African men and women had to confront, as they were all subjected to the same "varied wickedness of colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism and global imperialists and fascists" (514). And indeed, Adichie does not try to hijack these genderless experiences as things that are peculiar to the female gender. Strewn across her fiction are shared experiences of racism, the dehumanisation of people of colour, effects of military dictatorship and neocolonialism, among other vices, which are equally and coevally experienced by the male and female gender.

Nonetheless, the thrust of Adichie's feminist vision is underpinned in the argument that women in Africa and black women in general, in addition to the burdens put on them and the male gender by Western imperialists, also have to deal with the burdens of faulty socialisations about gender that have refused to evolve over the years. She is unmistakable in her argument that black women suffer a second-level discrimination just for being women, reechoing Collins' notion of intersecting oppressions (*Black Feminist Thought* 273). Kimberlé Crenshaw further describes it as structural intersectionality – the kind of multilayered and routinised forms of domination that often converge in the lives of these women, hindering their ability to create

alternatives to the abusive relationships they find themselves in (358). In this case, it is no longer the white supremacist male figure that superintends the domination of the female gender, but an institutionalised form of patriarchy that is often reasserted by men and women. In the face of such grave injustice against the female gender, Adichie finds her voice and reflects the social relevance and moral responsibility of every writer, especially in a world filled with social injustice, inequality and class struggle. Her impassioned call, as we see in *Dear Ijeawele or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*, is for every woman to adopt the solid, unbending belief and feminist premise that: "I matter. I matter equally. Not 'if only'. Not 'as long as'. I matter equally. Full stop" (1). By advocating for this level of self-awareness that does not establish itself in relation to a supposed Subject, Adichie is literally asking women to take Simone de Beauvoir's advice. Beauvoir believes that the subordination of women to men is not based on any historical event or any social occurrence, and if woman "seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change" 18). Judith Butler does not fully believe that the agency in question can change things, but she reinforces Beauvoir's position when she insists that gender is not a stable identity or "locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" ("Performative Acts", 519). This explains Adichie's insistence that the foundational belief every feminist must hold so dearly is the one that asserts the importance of their existence, without necessarily being in relation to anyone or anything else. And story after story, book after book, Adichie dedicates her oeuvre towards validating the wholesomeness of the female gender.

Making Women the New Class Monitors

In *We Should All Be Feminists,* Adichie tells a hilarious, yet very poignant story about gender discrimination and sexism in Nigeria. When she was a young girl in a primary school in Nsukka, southeastern Nigeria, her teacher administered a test and promised that whoever had the highest score would become class monitor. Excited by the challenge, she put in her best performance, scored the highest, but was not made the class monitor, simply because "my teacher said the monitor had to be a boy. She had forgotten to make that clear earlier; she assumed it was obvious. A boy had the second-highest score on the test. And he would be monitor" (3). Even though the incident happened when she was young, Adichie has dedicated her art to ensuring that women become the new set of class monitors in her world. This explains why females are at the centre of her fictional works, in contrast to the seemingly "fatalistic logic of the unassailable position" (to borrow Achebe's words) of men as central characters in African literary convention.

Her debut novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, introduces us to the intricate life of Kambili Achike, a fifteen-year-old teenage girl who grows up in a highly patriarchal family. Under the rigid control of her father, Eugene Achike, a very wealthy philanthropist and, ironically, a champion of human rights, Kambili, her brother Jaja, and their mother, grow up in an atmosphere of fear and trepidation, as the overarching tentacles of male authority eat deep into the foundations of a family that should have been closely knit. Adichie's subsequent novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* is a story about the Nigerian civil war, but Adichie, who would never miss an opportunity to cast her feminist vision, makes a female character, Olanna, the key person around whom the story revolves. She also wastes no time to highlight some patriarchal issues like the desperation to have children, especially male children, the place of the girl child, and the concept of adultery. In

retaliation for her boyfriend, Odenigbo, sleeping with Amala, a girl his mother brings from the village in Olanna's absence, Olanna goes on to sleep with Richard, her sister's boyfriend and informs Odenigbo about it. This goes against the African socialisation that excuses male infidelity, while criminalising and crucifying women who commit the same offence.

In *Americanah*, Adichie continues with her choice of a female as lead character, with Ifemelu, a US immigrant, battling with issues of identity, racism and relationship struggles. More instructively, Adichie gives Ifemelu a lot of freedom that is not usually common in patriarchal societies, as she chooses who she engages in sexual relationships with, cheats whenever she wants, and reignites her sexual relationship with her first love, Obinze, even though he is already married to Kosi. However, Adichie achieves her richest and fullest exploration of gender politics in her brilliant collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, as she maximises short fiction to address topical issues of feminism and patriarchy. Adichie offers a redemptive construction of the female gender, making women the central thrust of her stories, and forcing the world to rethink the way it construes heroes. Take, for instance, "The American Embassy", which is a deeply disturbing story of political struggle and the fight for democratic freedom, only that this time, it is from the perspective of a woman. The main character in the story is the wife of the co-editor of *The New Nigeria*, a pro-democracy newspaper championing the fight against General Sani Abacha's military regime. After her husband writes a very scathing editorial about Abacha, he is forced into exile, as the government comes after him and his family. His wife is molested and his son, Ugonna, is killed by a trigger-happy officer. After she attempts to apply for asylum at the American Embassy, the woman decides to walk away from a potential reunion with her husband in America, as she chooses instead, to nurse the memory of Ugonna in their ancestral home.

A conventional rendering of the story would have focused on a celebrated journalist and freedom fighter using the power of the pen to fight for his country's democratic freedom. Nigerian political history is replete with such stories of men who fought the different governments of their day, using the instrumentality of the pen to demonstrate unrivalled courage in the face of tyranny. We have the likes of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ray Ekpu and the late Dele Giwa, who was murdered by state actors through a letter bomb for his many editorial interventions during the time of Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria's one-time military dictator. But then, has it ever occurred to anyone that Dele Giwa ever had a wife? While the society celebrates men who fight for the masses in their different fields, is there anyone who ever remembers to celebrate the women in their lives who also stand by them, giving them all the moral support to continue?

In "The American Embassy" Adichie forces upon us the inconvenience of interrogating phenomena that are normally considered irrelevant, foregrounding the life experiences of people we would rather prefer forgotten. In doing this, she elevates the everyday people playing significant roles, but who are rather 'declassed' and denied any form of agency because of their gender. She finds worthy literary companions in Maxim Gorky and Alex La Guma (see La Guma's "What I Learned from Maxim Gorky"), who believe that the writer's ultimate objective must be the elevation of mankind through his art, and this has to come through a deliberate foregrounding of the usually undermined and ignored in society. Instead of a romanticisation of life and creation of ideal heroes, these writers invite us to reevaluate our idea of heroism. By humanising the conventional hero's wife in the story, Adichie moves the centre of heroism and makes us appreciate the people behind the scenes even more. Notably, we get to learn from the editor's wife that what the society refers to as courage can be a messianic complex and "simply

an exaggerated selfishness" (136). While such celebrated public heroes are considered to be giving all for the betterment of their society, there is a sense of performativity to it, as we see in the case of this editor who forgets "about his cousin's wedding even though they had agreed to be wedding sponsors" (136). The image of the woman we see at the end of the story is that of someone who has been permanently damaged psychologically, and whose centre of existence no longer holds. A dispassionate reader is forced to ask if the editor's supposed sacrifice is really worth it, as he loses his family while also failing to save his country. In a sense, paying attention to large-banner causes can obscure the ethics of attention to the little things, the details of everyday life, which matter a lot to feminists. They are often very concerned with everyday life because this is where gender inequality often manifests most clearly. While the men choose to pay attention to the big things, the little things like cooking, doing the laundry and other chores are often abandoned to the women, but it is those little things that keep the world going and life will come to a halt without them.

Adichie's new preoccupation of making women class monitors continues in the title story, "The Thing Around Your Neck", which is a story about the romantic relationship between Akunna and her American boyfriend. Despite coming to America on a visa lottery and becoming homeless shortly after, Akunna is the atypical Nigerian woman who lives on her own terms. Instead of surrendering herself to the sexual exploitations of her uncle who facilitated her immigration to the United States, she chooses instead to become homeless and gets a job at a restaurant as a waiter. In place of a formal education, she chooses to empower herself by reading books at the public library, in line with course syllabi on school websites. And when she finally starts a relationship with her American boyfriend, "[y]ou knew by people's reactions that you two were abnormal" (125), but she still ensures the relationship is strictly on her own terms,

despite not having the financial wherewithal to live a decent life without him. An average black woman in her shoes would have considered a relationship with a young American man as a major achievement to be celebrated, but what we get to see is a situation where the American is the one going the extra mile to keep the relationship. To get a more robust picture of Adichie's view about ideal relationships, one has to look at how the story ends:

> He held you while you cried, smoothed your hair, and offered to buy your ticket, to go with you to see your family. You said no, you needed to go alone. He asked if you would come back and you reminded him that you had a green card and you would lose it if you did not come back in one year. He said you knew what he meant, would you come back, come back?
>
> You turned away and said nothing, and when he drove you to the airport, you hugged him tight for a long, long moment, and then you let go. (127)

After so many years of wishing she could travel home, the opportunity finally presents itself when her father dies, and her boyfriend buys her a ticket to travel home. While it is apparent that Akunna is emotionally invested in the relationship, she is not obliged to come back to him when she returns to America. The possessiveness of regular relationships is absent in this one, as she has the option to either return to him or chart a different course for herself. This goes against the conventional notion of a colonised black female body and a "construction of the black female as the embodiment of sex and the attendant invisibility of black women as the unvoiced, unseen - everything that is not white" (Hammond, 94). On a philosophical level, Adichie appears to believe in the concept of living in the moment, or what psychologists call mindfulness, as nothing in life is truly guaranteed. So, despite hugging her boyfriend tight for a long moment, Akunna still finds the ability to let go. It also signals a strong sense of independence and choosing to live for herself, instead of existing at the instance and approval of the man.

It must be mentioned that Adichie paints nearly all men in the collection of stories with a broad brush, projecting them as morally flawed in different ways – thieves, cultists, sexual

predators, philanderers, murderers of a very mindless kind, unromantic, arrogant, depraved, individualistic, and so on. The male gender appears to be on trial and most male figures we encounter are blemished in one way or the other, thereby giving the women the necessary justification to 'cancel' them, either physically or psychologically. This is a total reversal of the image of women in many novels written by men, where women are often presented as simplistic and predictable. In "Cell One", all the thieves that rob their parents and other neighbours in a supposedly elitist Nsukka campus are boys, among whom are Nnamabia, the narrator's brother, and Osita, their neghbour's son. The narrator constantly refers to them as "thieving boys", and goes on to inform us that:

> This was the season of thefts on our serene Nsukka campus. Boys who had grown up watching Sesame Street, reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast, attending the university staff primary school in smartly polished brown sandals, were now cutting through the mosquito netting of their neighbors' windows, sliding out glass louvers, and climbing in to steal TVs and VCRs. We knew the thieves. (3)

As the story progresses, there is hardly any positive thing to note about the male characters in the story. Nnamabia's defiant behaviour finds a perfect seedbed in his mother's indulgent and doting behaviour, which is characteristic of many patriarchal African women and their treatment of male children. Like Adichie notes in *We Should All Be Feminists*, the bar of expectation is usually too low for the male child in African societies, which encourages bad behaviour.

Remarkably, Adichie denounces any form of hatred for men, insisting instead, that both genders have their strengths which can best be channelled into symbiotic relationships. She insists that, "[b]oys and girls are undeniably different biologically, but socialization exaggerates the differences" (35). In essence, biologically delineated roles like childbearing and breastfeeding can be done by the woman because men have no biological capacity to do that, but every other role in the house that is traditionally considered feminine must be assigned equally,

and that includes childcare and other chores that are usually gendered by the society. Sadly, there is still a long way to go, as these faulty socialisations that seek to maintain the patriarchal status quo are reinforced by both men and fundamentalist women, which, according to Heidi Epstein, makes them a part of the problem. In "Tomorrow is too Far", Adichie highlights the problem such women pose to society, as they end up unbalancing the family dynamics in a hitherto closely knit family. The narrator, a young girl, learns to live with the reality of being a second-class child in her own family, as she watches both her mother and grandmother treat her older brother, Nonso, as the most important child, simply because he is a male child. She informs us that, "in the evenings Grandmama let only your brother Nonso climb the trees to shake a loaded branch, although you were a better climber than he was" (189). Living in constant dread of her Otherness, such patriarchal-affirmative actions come with grave implications, as the narrator has to figure out the best way to reclaim her right to existence:

> That summer, eighteen years ago, was the summer of your first self-realization. The summer you knew that something had to happen to Nonso, so that you could survive. Even at ten you knew that some people can take up too much space by simply being, that by existing, some people can stifle others. (196-97)

Even though her initial goal was to mar the perfection of Nonso's body and "make him less lovable", the idea of conspiring with her cousin, Dozie, to scare Nonso while he is on top of a tree turns fatal, as he falls from the tree, hits his head on a stone and dies. As condemnable as her action might be, the root cause can be traced to the distorted family dynamics, which engender hatred and strife between her and her brother.

One thing any reader cannot miss is Adichie's stylistic use of the second-person singular, 'you' in the story, which comes across as a direct address to them. It forces the reader into the story and takes their emotions along. But more importantly, Adichie foregrounds and subverts the politics of language and the absence of an epicene pronoun to accommodate both sexes. The

use of the third-person masculine pronoun, he, has been largely considered as androcentric by many feminists, and it is a debate that has been on for so long. Dennis Baron refers to this phenomenon as a sexist bias of the grammarians, despite the less than satisfactory solution that *he* presents (85). By using the second-person pronoun, the reader feels like a part of the story, and the characters, experiences and situations are personalised in such a way that even the male reader is forced to become empathetic towards the plight of the female character in the story.

The Failure of Heterosexual Marriages

Marriage and motherhood are often considered as the ultimate achievements for any woman in most African societies, and it does not matter the kind of marriage, as long as the woman is in a man's house. In the Igbo tradition, and in many Nigerian societies, many women are literally or metaphorically pushed into their husbands' homes without any pre-existing relationship between the couples. This situation is more severe in northern Nigeria, like in the case of Habiba, which I discussed in the preceding chapter. Lauretta Ngcobo contends that "[e]very woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full" (533). Fonchingong is even more unequivocal, as he claims that "a woman's honour and dignity often consist in her strict adherence to idealized norms of wifehood and motherhood" (138). Marriage and procreation in the patriarchal African tradition therefore signpost the ultimate goal of a woman's existence, as she is considered incomplete without being married and having (male) children. Unfortunately, this fixation on marriage without any focus on compatibility ends up producing loveless marriages where spouses have no functional relationship, and they only continue in such forced unions because of their children and in order to avoid negative stereotyping by the society.

In *The Thing Around Your Neck,* Adichie approaches this problem of forced marriages with a certain level of urgency, as we get to see the apparent flaws and irreconcilable differences between different couples. Story after story, we see how supposedly routine activities paper over the cracks of the main issue of incompatibility. We see women, mostly trophy wives, find themselves in ambivalent situations where they are unable to please their husbands and also unable to walk away from their marriages. "On Monday of Last Week" is the story of Kamara and Tobechi as a couple, but it is also the story of Tracy and Neil, as both couples live as flat mates without any form of emotional connection. Between Kamara and Tobechi, "the hard things that had slipped in between them" (85) only make them familiar strangers, despite being intimate lovers at the university. Even though they got married immediately after their national youth service, they are soon separated, as Tobechi gets an American visa, and leaves Nigeria shortly after. The years in between their reunion only end up pulling them apart emotionally, as Kamara now "thought for a moment that he was somebody she did not know at all" (84). The many vagaries of long-distance relationships are foregrounded in this story, because even though "[s]he was finally with Tobechi in America, finally with her good man, …the feeling was one of flatness" (85). Their sex life is not spared either:

> In bed, she felt nothing except for the rubbery friction of skin against skin and she clearly remembered the way it used to be between them, he silent and gentle and firm, she loud and grasping and writhing. Now, she wondered if it was even the same Tobechi, this person who seemed so eager, so theatrical, and who, most worrying of all, had begun to talk in that false accent that made her want to slap his face. (84)

Most readers would feel a sense of loss at this point, as this once blossoming relationship becomes yet another statistic of failed marriages. But it is not Kamara and Tobechi's marriage alone that is in the woods, as we also read that Chinwe, Kamara's friend, is heartbroken because her husband got another woman pregnant in an extramarital relationship, "and he was going to

pay her bride price because Chinwe had two daughters and the woman came from a family of many sons" (85). Furthermore, we see a cold and very predictable relationship between Neil and Tracy, the couple Kamara later gets to serve as a nanny. There appears to be no emotional connection between them, as their son, Josh, is the only reason that brings them together and all their conversations revolve around his activities.

The dysfunctional nature of heterosexual relationships continues in "The Arrangers of Marriage", the story of Chinaza, whose foster parents arrange for her to marry an American-based doctor, Ofodile, who she had no prior relationship with. Her foster parents, Uncle Ike and Aunty Ada, seem to be in a hurry to offload her to a man's house, hence, the "smile that had loosened his face when [Uncle Ike] told me that the perfect husband had been found for me" (171). But such blind marriage arrangements are bound to throw up compatibility issues for the couple, and Chinaza begins her journey of discovery the very moment she arrives with her new husband in America. For instance, despite being married for a few weeks, she notices for the first time that Ofodile "walked with his hands swinging to his back" (173), and on her first night in his house, she complains that:

> [t]hey did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage. No mention of offensive snoring, no mention of houses that turned out to be furniture-challenged flats" (170).

Ironically, her foster parents believe that she should owe them a debt of gratitude. Aunty Ada rhetorically asks her: "What have we not done for you? We raise you as our own and then find you an *ezigbo di*! A doctor in America! It is like we won a lottery for you!" (172). They are either completely oblivious of the true situation of that arranged marriage, or they seem not to care. The irony about it all is that Ofodile is better off being single, as he lacks the wherewithal to feed an extra mouth. For instance, when Chinaza queries him about why she cannot have her tea with

milk and sugar, he falsely claims that Americans do not have their tea with milk and sugar. A man suffering from a chronic inferiority complex and who believes that everything Americans do is perfect, he considers it his primary responsibility to lecture Chinaza on how to live and adapt to the American culture. But the more we get to read about him, the cruder and more unrefined we find him to be. Adichie's description of the first sexual experience between the new couple shows that it is a non-consensual sexual encounter. I take the liberty to reproduce that passage copiously to drive home this point:

> My husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine. His chest flattened my breasts.
>
> "Good morning," I said, opening sleep-crusted eyes. He grunted, a sound that might have been a response to my greeting or part of the ritual he was performing. He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist.
>
> "Wait—" I said, so that I could take the nightdress off, so it would not seem so hasty. But he had crushed his mouth down on mine. Another thing the arrangers of marriage failed to mention—mouths that told the story of sleep, that felt clammy like old chewing gum, that smelled like the rubbish dumps at Ogbete Market. His breathing rasped as he moved, as if his nostrils were too narrow for the air that had to be let out. When he finally stopped thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs. I did not move until he climbed off me to go into the bathroom. I pulled my nightdress down, straightened it over my hips. (170-71)

As troubling as this experience might be, Chinaza is expected to not only accept it, but also to enjoy it, since she is a woman, and the greatest ambition of any woman should be to take a man's surname and be in his house. The story reaches a climax when Ofodile randomly informs her that he got married to an American woman for the purpose of getting a green card, and that the divorce process had gotten complicated. When Chinaza insists that she deserved to know before their wedding, Ofodile rudely interjects: "[i]t wouldn't have made a difference. Your uncle and aunt had decided. Were you going to say no to people who have taken care of you since your parents died?" (185). Ofodile's petulant and derisive behaviour is completely unpardonable, as

he keeps on making Chinaza believe that being married to him is her ultimate reward. To further rub this in, he contemptuously adds, "[b]esides, with the way things are messed up back home, what would you have done? … Aren't people with master's degrees roaming the streets, jobless?" This patriarchal conception of marriage as a major trophy for women emboldens men to treat them shabbily because they believe that they are doing the women a favour by marrying them. When Chinaza asks Ofodile why he married her, she is only echoing the question in the hearts of many women who experience the many ills of patriarchy in an ultra-conservative society where divorce is often frowned at. Ofodile's response to the question further foregrounds how patriarchal men view the institution of marriage:

> "I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin." He smiled. He looked even more tired when he smiled. "I probably should tell her how wrong she was." (185)

The only reason the marriage between Ofodile and Chinaza happens is because he wanted a Nigerian wife, and it did not matter whether they were compatible or not. The first time he has sex with her, he does not care to know if she wants it or not, and puts no effort into making her body ready for sex. All that matters to him is having an ejaculation, and after he is done, the only memory that stays with him is that Chinaza was not a virgin when he married her. There is a sense of profound irony here, because Nia, Ofodile's neighbour, informs Chinaza that she slept with him in the first week of his arrival, but he never mentions this to Chinaza. Also, there is no way to tell how many sexual experiences he had before getting married, but he places himself in a position to adjudicate over her sexual life. Ofodile did not just randomly pick that legislating over how a woman uses her body; it is an ingrained part of the patriarchal culture. The fact that his mother found Chinaza's probable virginity as another major reason to recommend her to his son further amplifies the commodification of a woman's body. Interestingly, she does not deem it

necessary to ask her son if he is also a virgin, because there is this tacit approval of promiscuity among men, while women are always expected to have higher standards. Adichie notes, "[w]e teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way boys are. If we have sons, we don't mind knowing about their girlfriends. But our daughters' boyfriends? God forbid" (*We Should* 32). She painfully regrets:

> We police girls. We praise girls for virginity but we don't praise boys for virginity (and it makes me wonder how exactly this is supposed to work out, since the loss of virginity is a process that usually involves two people of opposite genders). (*We Should* 32)

By problematising these double standards around virginity in the society, Adichie is beaming the torchlight on this retrogressive aspect of the patriarchal system that gives men a free pass, while choosing to dictate to women how they should use their bodies. A new socialisation would require a de-emphasising of virginity, as "[e]very conversation about virginity becomes a conversation about shame" (*Dear Ijeawele* 54).

If Adichie has issues with men's criteria for choosing who they marry, she also does not spare women who choose patriarchal men simply because of their wealth or social status. In "Imitation", we read about Nkem, a woman who marries Obiora because of his wealth and status in society. Given her wretched background, she considers marrying Obiora her highest achievement in life, because "[w]hen he asked if she would marry him, she thought how unnecessary it was, his asking, since she would have been happy simply to be told" (31). Trifle status symbols like marrying into the coveted league of the "Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies" are privileges that she relishes, making her believe that she is better than other women. So, instead of forming support communities with other women, she is more concerned about being a quasi-comprador who finds herself above the other women on the patriarchal food chain. It does not matter to her that she is kept in America as a trophy

wife, while her husband spends most of the year in Nigeria, only visiting America for one month every year to see his family. When their American neighbours begin to wonder why Obiora does not stay with his family in their highbrow American home, he claims that white people often considered their way of life as the only ideal, "[a]nd although Nkem knew many Nigerian couples who lived together, all year, she said nothing".

Marrying a man because of his wealth comes with its many side effects, as other women who depend on men for survival would also consider the man as a prize they must compete for. It therefore comes as no surprise when Nkem's friend, Ijemamaka, reports that Obiora has a new girlfriend in Nigeria who he lavishes his wealth on, thereby breaking his marriage vow of faithfulness. After describing the new girlfriend, Ijemamaka conclusively submits: "but I heard she has moved into your house. This is what happens when you marry a rich man" (21). The only thing Nkem brings to the table in this marriage relationship is her beauty, for:

> Her face has always made people talk—how perfectly oval it is, how flawless the dark skin—but Obiora's calling her eyes mermaid eyes used to make her feel newly beautiful, as though the compliment gave her another set of eyes. (27)

In contrast, Obiora is a "short, ordinary, light-skinned man wearing an expensive sports jacket and a purple shirt" (37). But it matters little, since he is a wealthy man, and just like the popular remark in Nigerian local parlance, "na money be fine bobo", which, loosely translated, means "it is wealth that makes a man handsome". When Nkem mentions to her housemaid, Amaechi, that Obiora was keeping a girlfriend in Nigeria and that the girl was living in their matrimonial home, Amaechi suggests placatingly that Nkem should discuss it with Obiora and he would ask his girlfriend to move out of the house. The faulty socialisation that excuses men for cheating comes to the fore again, as Amaechi's response when Nkem asks, "[s]o after he moves her out, then what?", is simply a resigned, "[y]ou will forgive him, madam. Men are like that" (33). In a

vortex of retributive justice, Nkem also admits to dating different married men while she was still single, so one would expect her to both understand and accommodate Obiora's sexual escapades, she too having been a beneficiary of the largesse that comes from dating married men in the past. In such a morally flawed society, if the general assumption is that all men cheat, and all single girls date married men, why would Ijemamaka consider it a necessity to inform Nkem in the first place? Amaechi provides a suggestion:

> "Many women would be jealous, maybe your friend Ijemamaka is jealous. Maybe she is not a true friend. There are things she should not tell you. There are things that are good if you don't know." (34)

Based on the above, it is apparent that the only way to live and thrive in such a misogynistic world is to live with the paternalistic illusion of perfection, while blocking off narratives that alter the curated imagery of bliss in such marriages. It is a give and take, as Nkem sacrifices the true pleasures of marital bliss for the fleeting and ephemeral satisfaction of being called a rich man's wife. And it does not matter if her role is fully that of a housewife whose only job description is to look after their kids, Obiora has the financial capacity to sustain that kind of lifestyle that makes his wife completely dependent on him. But Betty Friedan insists that:

> It is urgent to understand how the very condition of being a housewife can create a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness in women. There are aspects of the housewife role that make it almost impossible for a woman of adult intelligence to retain a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or "I" without which a human being, man or woman, is not truly alive. For women of ability, in America today, I am convinced that there is something about the housewife state itself that is dangerous. (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 2)

It is this sense of emptiness that Nkem feels, knowing that her husband is in Nigeria having intimate relationships with younger ladies, while she is saddled with the task of raising their children in America. As a form of retaliation for such betrayal, Nkem cuts her hair, which is a signification of mourning and widowhood in the Igbo tradition. This explains Amaechi's

exclamation: “Chim o! Why did you cut your hair? What happened?” (28), when she finds out that Nkem has cut her hair. By cutting her hair, Nkem successfully murders Obiora on a psychological level, and the deification she once reserved for him dissipates without any prior warning. When Obiora returns to America for his yearly pilgrimage to his family, the Nkem he meets is a completely transformed woman, and for the first time, she starts letting her thoughts out. When she asks, “[c]an we cram a year’s worth of marriage into two months in the summer and three weeks in December?” and then follows up with another rhetorical question, “[c]an we compress marriage?”, she is only reclaiming her agency and refusing to continue as Obiora’s doormat. And for the first time since they got married, Nkem has an opinion about what they should do as a family: “[w]e are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos. We are moving back” (40). Up till that point, Obiora had made all the decisions on behalf of their family, and everything he decided was assumed to be the consensus between them, so we are informed that:

> Obiora continues to stare at her and she knows that he has never heard her speak up, never heard her take a stand. She wonders vaguely if that is what attracted him to her in the first place, that she deferred to him, that she let him speak for both of them. (40)

Without a doubt, it is not easy to get to this point for Nkem, because it first takes a psychological murder of Obiora for her to reclaim her agency. But having an opinion would definitely come with its consequences, as Obiora is not used to having a wife that has her own mind, and there is every likelihood of divorce, going into the future. Interestingly, if the marriage breaks down, the society would blame the woman for not being able to keep her home. Adichie has this in mind when she points out that: “[t]his is a threat—the destruction of a marriage, the possibility of not having a marriage at all—that in our society is much more likely to be used against a woman than against a man” (25).

Again and again, we see the many defects of heterosexual marriages, and readers are hence forced to reassess the reification of marriages and the assumed unassailable status symbol it ascribes to women in society. One question that one is forced to ask is if there is actually a need for marriage, if it entails that level of emotional detachment that makes each day predictable. Sadly, women appear to bear the brunt of such marriages in a highly chauvinistic society, as it deprives them of their agency and reduces them to sub-humans. Beauvoir laments this phenomenon when she says, "[t]he tragedy of marriage is not that it fails to assure woman the promised happiness – there is no such thing as assurance in regard to happiness – but that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine" (462).

Economic Subjugation, Sexual Objectification of Women and a Culture of Subservience

Another trope that takes centre stage in *The Thing Around Your Neck* is the sexualisation and objectification of women, which can be closely traced to their economic subjugation. Adichie laments a situation where "a man and a woman are doing the same job, with the same qualifications, and the man is paid more because he is a man" (*We Should* 4). Estelle Freedman traces the reason for this disparity in labour wages to the need for patriarchy to perpetuate the lingering ideology of female dependency on men, as women earning the same wages as men would potentially weaken the patriarchal family. So, despite the transition from agricultural, family-based economies to the capitalist wage economy, it still did not transform the realities of women, as "women earned lower wages than men in sexually segregated job markets" (91-92). Interestingly, women found this dependency as a norm and part of their female destiny, as bell hooks argues, believing that "[b]eing taken care of was a source of pride and traditional power" (*Where We Stand* 52).

Sadly, this rigged patriarchal social order of accumulated advantages has given men an edge over time, putting them in a position where they determine what to hand to a woman and what she must give in return, which most often is her body. In "Jumping Monkey Hill", we see key parallels between the story and the story within the story, as both Ujunwa Ogundu, the main character of the story, and Chioma, the major character in her embedded narrative, are faced with the unpleasant choices of having to negotiate their career success with their own bodies. Ujunwa is a participant at the African Writers Workshop in South Africa, put together by the British Council and funded by the Chamberlain Arts Foundation. She and other participants from across Africa are forced to endure different levels of racial discrimination, while the females are further exposed to sexualisation and objectification by Edward Campbell, the workshop host. "At first, Ujunwa tried not to notice that Edward often stared at her body, that his eyes were never on her face but always lower" (105), but the lustful looks would not go away. When Ujunwa offers to give Edward her seat, he says, "I'd rather like you to lie down for me," and instead of a sense of outrage, she finds herself laughing about it, together with the Ugandan participant. But in her solemn moment, she is frustrated at how she lends herself a willing tool for her own dehumanisation:

> Sitting there, staring out into the black night, listening to the drink-softened voices around her, Ujunwa felt a self-loathing burst open in the bottom of her stomach. She should not have laughed when Edward said "I'd rather like you to lie down for me." It had not been funny. It had not been funny at all. She had hated it, hated the grin on his face and the glimpse of greenish teeth and the way he always looked at her chest rather than her face, the way his eyes climbed all over her, and yet she had made herself laugh like a deranged hyena. (108)

There is a mixture of racial discrimination and sexual objectification in what Edward feels for Ujunwa, which would normally be punished if he were to do same in the West. Just like the white South African participant remarks, "Edward would never look at a white woman like

that because what he felt for Ujunwa was a fancy without respect" (108-109). But he does not spare his sexualisation of African women for just Ujunwa, as he also tells the Senegalese participant who identifies as a lesbian about dreaming of her naked navel. Ujunwa is upset about this and expects some form of group revolt, but the acquiescence from other participants stokes a sense of betrayal, even though they are all victims of Edward's excesses. The male participants might not be able to relate with the feeling of betrayal because they do not understand what it means to suffer discrimination on the basis of their sex, even though they collectively suffer prejudice as a result of their skin colour. bell hooks explains it in the following words: "[w]hile institutionalized sexism was a social system that protected black male sexuality, it (socially) legitimized sexual exploitation of black females" (*Ain't I a Woman* 41). This legitimisation has its roots in the slave trade, as "[t]he designation of all black women as sexually depraved, immoral, and loose had its roots in the slave system" (*Ain't I a Woman* 77). Collins traces this sexual stereotyping of African women through different occurrences over many centuries and concludes that "women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, "wild" sexuality" (*Black Sexual Politics* 27). Therefore, objectifying black women is not a random act, but something that finds its roots in the racial and sexist socialisation in the West because of slave trade.

The helplessness that the participants feel in the face of such intimidation can be traced to the uneven wealth distribution and the high poverty rate in Africa. Many Africans are forced to either go against their values or remain silent in the face of aggravated discrimination, as long as the aggressor holds the key to their survival. Kenneth Bilby and Filomina Steady insist that, "one might also assume that, in contrast, the society placed a low valuation on women, who were likely to be perceived as mere accessories in the battle for survival" (453). In essence, where men

and women are involved and it requires the aggressor taking advantage of the women either sexually or otherwise, the male victims might look away, as they sacrifice the women for their collective interests. In the case of the conference participants, they see Edward as a steppingstone in their career; hence, they must do everything to keep him happy. We learn about this scheming from the Tanzanian participant:

> Then he said, more seriously, that Edward was connected and could find them a London agent; there was no need to antagonize the man, no need to close doors to opportunity. He, for one, didn't want to end up at that dull teaching job in Arusha. (112)

For the male participants, they did not mind throwing their female participants under the bus, as long as their economic survival was shored up by their ability to be silent and acquiescent in the face of such unpardonable aggravation. During their lunch break, instead of addressing the big elephant in the room, they choose to talk about an irrelevant waiter, thereby deflecting from the challenge of confronting their collective enemy.

Both in the story and the story within the story, we see a heightened level of female objectification, and the females who are concerned about their survival are forced to surrender their pride to the scheming devices of the men. While Edward objectifies Ujunwa and the Senegalese lesbian writer, Chioma suffers the same fate in the hands of alhaji, a customer of Merchant Trust Bank, in Ujunwa's story. Yinka, her colleague, is the conquered female who surrenders her body to alhaji as a tool for negotiating her career progress in the bank. In Nigeria, young ladies in the sales department are often expected to use their bodies as negotiating tools for winning and keeping new male customers, especially the uber-rich ones who believe their money can get them anything they want. During one of their sales visits, as Chioma watches Yinka "perched on the expansive lap" of alhaji, "talking about the benefits of a savings account

with Merchant Trust Bank" (105), all Chioma seems to see is the benefit of using her body as a tool for advancing in her career. And if she must also make progress in her newly found banking career, all she would need to do is follow Yinka's example.

The unfair distribution of economic resources and wealth puts women at a disadvantage and makes them easy prey in the hands of predatory patriarchy. Many of the women we see in this collection of stories find themselves at the mercy of men, and revolting against the status quo would mean being exposed to the harsh uncertainties of life, as they struggle for survival. For instance, in "The Arrangers of Marriage", Chinaza is forced to go back to Ofodile, as she comes to the sad realisation that Nia was right, "I could not leave yet" until she is able to get her work permit. She has to live with Ofodile's betrayal and mistreatment until she is able to find her feet in America. Nkem lives with loneliness as a constant companion in "Imitation" while her husband sleeps with multiple girlfriends in Nigeria, simply because she depends on him for economic provision. But then, Adichie's ideal feminist vision is for all women to refuse to cower in the face of such difficult realities. With Ujunwa and Chioma, she appears to be demonstrating that women have what bell hooks refers to as the gift of choice. bell hooks defines being oppressed as the absence of choices (*Feminist Theory* 5), and Adichie appears to show that the only way out of that economic oppression is to take a choice that many women in such situations would rather not consider. When the alhaji asks Yinka and Chioma to follow him into his bedroom, Adichie informs us:

> The alhaji turns again toward her, to wait for her to follow. But she does not follow. She turns to the door and opens it and walks out into the bright sunlight and past the Jeep in which the driver is sitting with the door hanging open, listening to the radio. "Aunty? Aunty, something happen?" he calls. She does not answer. She walks and walks, past the high gates and out to the street where she gets in a taxi and goes to the office to clear out her almost-empty desk. (*The Thing* 110)

By walking away from the offer to use her body as a climbing tool, Chioma undeniably brings an end to her banking career that is yet to take off. If we want to know how she ends up, we just have to turn to Ujunwa, who we later realise is telling her real-life experience through an alter-ego who she created in her story as Chioma. Having lost out in the survival fight she experienced in the banking industry, she decides to explore whatever promise her writing career holds, only to still experience another round of objectification and discrimination in the hands of Edward. When he dismisses her story as agenda writing and says it is not a real story of real people,

> it was the victory in his eyes that made her stand up and start to laugh. The participants stared at her. She laughed and laughed and they watched her and then she picked up her papers… There were other things Ujunwa wanted to say, but she did not say them. There were tears crowding up in her eyes but she did not let them out. She was looking forward to calling her mother, and as she walked back to her cabin, she wondered whether this ending, in a story, would be considered plausible. (113-14)

Yet again, faced with the option of negotiating her way in the world with her body, Ujunwa is defiant and chooses to call the bluff of Edward, much to the surprise of her fellow participants who are treating the conference as their ticket to the next breakthrough in their careers. While she does so, she is also conscious about her place in the bigger story; curious about the plausibility of her response to aggravated objectification, because women are expected to give in instead of fighting back. In a sense, we can say that the full realisation of the defiant Ujunwa in "Jumping Monkey Hill" is the Akunna we find in "The Thing Around Your Neck", as the latter revolts against the sexual harassment by her uncle, only to end up with an American boyfriend who allows her to live on her own terms.

However, intricately connected to the faulty patriarchal socialisation that portrays women as sexual objects, is the subconscious desire for male validation in the women. They often find themselves unconsciously auditioning for male attention, and this makes them go the extra mile

to put on their best performance so as to be considered attractive by men. The re-socialisation that Adichie proposes also addresses this subconscious psychological conditioning of the female to always want to be found attractive and acceptable by the male figure. In addition to other patriarchal structures like the economic, cultural and social factors, that overarching need to be found desirable by the male figure is a self-sabotaging configuration in the female psyche that must be dismantled if the woman would ever break free from the patriarchal dispensation. In "Imitation," Nkem loses every ability to have an opinion, instead surrendering all decision-making to her husband, simply because silence was the price she needs to pay if she must retain her position. After they arrive in the United States, "[s]he stayed back at first, after Adanna, to take a number of computer courses because Obiora said it was a good idea" (25), not because she wanted to. In another place, "[h]e ordered wine that tasted sour on her tongue, telling her, "You will come to like it," and so she made herself like the wine right away" (30). Again and again, she keeps shrinking herself to accommodate him, never bothering to consider herself as someone worth pleasing too.

We find an interesting situational irony in "Jumping Monkey Hill" when Edward makes a suggestive remark to the Senegalese about dreaming of her naked navel, and Ujunwa

> felt upset, too, to hear that Edward was making suggestive remarks to someone else, and she wondered what her pique meant. Had she come to see his ogling as her due? She was uncomfortable thinking about this, about reading that night, and so in the afternoon, lingering over lunch, she asked the Senegalese what she had said when Edward spoke of her naked navel. (111)

While Ujunwa appears to detest being sexually objectified by Edward, she appears to individualise the pain of being so treated and gets jealous when he extends the same treatment to another woman. Also, in Ujunwa's story, Chioma detests being molested by men dangling a job offer as a bait to a girl who desperately needs a job, but when she attends an interview with the

deputy manager at Merchant Trust Bank, "she desperately wishes he would notice her"(103). When he fails to notice her in a sexual manner, she feels disappointed and "is sulky that he does not look at her as a man looks at a woman" (103). The woman in that sexist society is an existential irony, as she desires attention, yet detests when men do what men are known for in a patriarchal society. The explanation can be found in the fact that women have been subjected to many years of sexual and emotional abuse orchestrated and enabled by patriarchy, and when the same men are not doing what women expect them to do in the given circumstances, there is a level of disappointment that comes with it. This is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy which enables the rape culture in patriarchal societies, as men often regard the resistance of women as a tacit endorsement which only tries to test their manhood and persistence level.

The trope of self-abnegation that is required for patriarchy to thrive reaches its peak in "The Shivering", as we get to read about Ukamaka who builds her entire life around her ex-boyfriend, Udenna. She tells Chinedu, her gay friend who becomes a sudden companion after she learns about a plane crash in Nigeria, "I was planning to move back after graduate school and work with an NGO in Lagos, but Udenna wanted to go into politics, so I started planning to live in Abuja instead" (158). In another place, she convinces herself that "[t]he past three years of sleeping with Udenna and aligning her plans to Udenna's and cooking with peppers were not, after all, in her imagination" (151). In a string of endless laments, Ukamaka continues:

> "He used to make me feel that nothing I said was witty enough or sarcastic enough or smart enough. He was always struggling to be different, even when it didn't matter. It was as if he was performing his life instead of living his life…
>
> "He knew I loved being here, but he was always telling me how Princeton was a boring school, and that it was out of touch. If he thought I was too happy about something that did not have to do with him, he always found a way to put it down. How can you love somebody and yet want to manage the amount of happiness that person is allowed?" (154)

As the story progresses, we see the steep price that women must pay to be in 'happy' relationships with men. Ukamaka literally loses herself to keep Udenna, only for him to walk out of the relationship unceremoniously. With Ukamaka and Udenna, Adichie appears to be telling women that they do not need to put up a show to please or keep a man, as he would still walk away whenever he wanted.

Homosexuality and the Notion of Sexual Experimentation

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf argues that religious guilt generally suppresses women's sexuality, thereby making it impossible for them to enjoy the full pleasures of sex. Going further, and quoting Rosalind Miles, she says that "older patriarchal religions have sought…to control "all women via a technique which betrays a conscious determination to deal with the 'problem' of women's sexuality by destroying it wholesale"" (131). Adichie agrees with this when she says: "[t]he shame we attach to female sexuality is about control. Many cultures and religions control women's bodies in one way or another" (Dear Ijeawele, 53-54). Wolf believes that the reason for such control comes down to the fact that "women's capacity for genital pleasure is theoretically inexhaustible" (132); hence, the only way to curtail it is for the toga of shame to be associated with it. Adichie goes further to highlight the implications of this shame inherited from a patriarchal culture:

> We teach girls shame. Close your legs. Cover yourself. We make them feel as though by being born female, they are already guilty of something. And so girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. Who silence themselves. Who cannot say what they truly think. Who have turned pretence into an art form. (*We Should* 33)

The ideal patriarchal female is the type that has no opinion about sex, someone who surrenders herself for sex as an act of procreation and for the man's pleasure. A woman who is vocal about her sex life or who admits to finding pleasure in sex is usually regarded as wayward and loose,

which is a clear departure from the pious and prudish ideal that religion and tradition prescribe. Tonya Haynes notes that it is even worse for black women and Caribbeans, who are forced to adopt sexual silences as a way of maintaining their respectability. She further points out that "[s]ilence on sexuality emerges as strategic in that it counters the racialized and sexualized reductionist rendering of Afro-Caribbean women's sexuality as excessive and bestial and of Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality as cast in orientalizing terms" (Online).

In *The Thing Around Your Neck,* the women we read about are mostly people who receive sex as an action done to them; people who must have sex as a part of their marital obligation. Chinaza dreads the thought of having sex with Ofodile in "The Arrangers of Marriage", "and hoped that no wifely duties would be required of [her]" (170). When Ofodile finally has sex with her the following morning, it is not an exciting experience for her, as she has to endure the smell of his mouth and the crude manner he goes about it. The overarching ability to please the male partner during sexual intercourse continues in "Imitation", with Obiora receiving whatever kind of pleasure he requested, as we are told that Nkem "would shower with him, sink down to her knees and take him in her mouth, excited by him and by the steam enclosing them" (39). However, we find an exception in Adichie's ideal feminine ideal, Akunna, who chooses when and how to respond to her sexual experiences, and who uses orgasm (or the lack of it) as a tool to control her American boyfriend and register her grievance:

> That night, you didn't moan when he was inside you, you bit your lips and pretended that you didn't come because you knew he would worry. Later you told him why you were upset, that even though you went to Chang's so often together, even though you had kissed just before the menus came, the Chinese man had assumed you could not possibly be his girlfriend, and he had smiled and said nothing. (123)

Emotionally, Akunna can be said to be fully rounded, always in touch with her emotions and experiencing sex as pleasure, not a duty. She is a clear departure from the patriarchal image of the woman who only receives sexual acts and is always at the man's service.

It is important to mention at this point that Adichie approaches the topic of gay sex with a high level of circumspection, given her conservative upbringing and very diverse audience. As a writer writing for both local and diasporic audiences, she has managed to balance the expectations of both worlds, writing about sex in a manner that is discretely explicit, without offending readers from both worlds. In approaching the motif of homosexuality, she tries to balance the realities and nuances of sexuality across divides with the sensibilities of audiences not very familiar with such developments. However, she tries to banish any form of narrative that attempts to project homosexuality as foreign to Africa. In "Jumping Monkey Hill", when the Senegalese lesbian hands in her story for review and Edward says that homosexual stories of that sort were not reflective of Africa, Adichie seems to intrude into the conversation through Ujunwa, when she blurts out: "Which Africa?" (107). In this context, Edward is representative of the narrativising pushed by Western institutions about Africa without knowing so much about the real Africa. Edward believes that homosexuality in Africa is an imposition of "Western ideas on African venues" (107), and by highlighting that thought, Adichie is only foregrounding notions of homosexuality in Africa that have been closely embraced both by the colonialists and earlier African writers who have not taken time to study the history of matriarchal families in Africa and other occurrences of homoeroticism on the continent.

Through Ujunwa, Adichie is attempting to correct this notion and represent a new image of Africa where homosexuality is not a foreign concept. But the widespread attitude of Africans towards the idea of homosexuality keeps ringing through the story. When the Senegalese writer

chose to come out about her sexuality to her parents, "they now treated her being a lesbian as a mild joke and continued to speak of the families of suitable young men" (102). This is the usual attitude of most African parents whenever their children embrace anything they are not familiar with – denial. But it is not the girl's parents alone who are usually shocked by such admission; even the society discriminates against homosexuality as a practice, just like we see in the reaction of some of the participants: "[t]he black South African looked alarmed when he heard "lesbian". He got up and walked away" (102).

In "On Monday of Last Week", Adichie takes her conception of gay sexuality a step further by introducing us to Kamara whose marriage to Tobechi has become passionless, and the only thing she now looks forward to is every opportunity she has to be with another female, Tracy. Tracy is Neil's wife and Josh's mum, but just like the relationship between Kamara and Tobechi, Tracy and Neil also have a distant and cold relationship, and they only talk about their son during the very few minutes of the day that they spend together. For someone who did not use to care about her looks since she arrived America, Adichie says:

> Since Monday of last week, Kamara had begun to stand in front of mirrors. She would turn from side to side, examining her lumpy middle and imagining it flat as a book cover, and then she would close her eyes and imagine Tracy caressing it with those paint-stained fingers. (73)

Remarkably, Kamara had no history of prior homosexual tendencies while she was in Nigeria, and it is easy to infer that the new environment she finds herself in gives her the freedom to cast off whatever inhibitions she might have had while still in Nigeria. Femi Eromosele notes that Adichie does not suggest that Kamara's sexual transformation happens as a result of Western influences, but the metaphor of freedom that America presents is too hard to miss. Since the heterosexual relationships are flawed, homosexual relationships come to the rescue, as Neil and Tobechi who experience a certain level of disconnect from their wives, are surreptitiously

replaced by female partners. When Neil emphasises to Kamara that she must not disturb Tracy for anything, he is only passing on an instruction the way he received it from Tracy, but we soon learn that it is not the female intrusion into Tracy's space that she hates but the male presence encroaching on her space (77).

The default attitude of Nigerians and many Africans towards such homoerotic relationships is yet again represented by Adichie in the following words: "A fellow woman who has the same thing you have? her friend Chinwe would say if she told her. Tufia! What kind of foolishness is that?" (78-79). As Kamara considers her newfound affection for Tracy and contemplates the possibility of sharing her excitement with her closest female friend, Chinwe, she dismisses the thought when she considers Chinwe's predictable response to her evolving sexuality. Even though she feels very much comfortable sharing other details of her life with her friend, Kamara does not want to expose her developing affection to someone who would not be able to understand and appreciate it. Chinwe's predictable response does not matter anymore, as we come to see, because:

> Saying those words to herself changed nothing, because what had happened in the kitchen that afternoon was a flowering of extravagant hope, because what now propelled her life was the thought that Tracy would come upstairs again. (79)

Whenever Kamara is with Tracy, all her sexual fantasies come alive, but with her husband, Tobechi, it is usually that feeling of flatness, with no excitement to look forward to. There is also that sense of possessiveness, as "Kamara was pleased that Tracy did not kiss Neil, that they said "Hi, you" to each other as though they were brother and sister" (93). But Tracy cuts the image of the free-spirited polyamorous bisexual who does not spare her admiration for just one sexual partner. When Maren, Josh's French teacher, shows up at their house, Tracy extends the same homophilial admiration to her, which makes Kamara jealous.

In “The Shivering” Adichie appears to suggest that religion and homosexuality can coexist, as we find Chinedu, recounting his gay relationship with Abidemi, a staunch Pentecostal who attends House on the Rock, a popular Pentecostal church in Nigeria, while still maintaining his homosexual lifestyle. Adichie underscores the hypocrisy of religion and government, as both churchgoers and politicians find themselves in a private gay club. Bearing in mind that religion expressly condemns homosexuality and there is a law that outright criminalises gay relations, finding an ardent Pentecostal and a former Head of State in the gay club is a direct contradiction of what these institutions stand for. However, Abidemi gets married to Kemi while still trying to keep Chinedu close because of the strong homoerotic connection he has with him. With this story, Adichie appears to be saying that such same-sex relationships fail to thrive in Nigeria because of societal censorship.

Altogether, Adichie is inviting readers to look at Africa again from a whole new lens, while jettisoning fixed notions of the continent that they have had for so long. At the same time, she is protesting the sociological conditioning of the woman to fit into a particular space and be a specific kind of character. By foregrounding some of the issues in this collection of stories, she is only pointing us to some of the structures that sustain them and inviting everyone to review their conceptualisation of these different issues. When it comes to homosexuality, Eromosele believes that Adichie’s goal “is to convey the ordinariness and normalcy of gay people” (109), as against the ostracisation they experience among heterosexual Africans. In all, Adichie is “hopeful, because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to remake themselves for the better” (*We Should* 21).

Chapter Four – Trans Politics and a Faulty Appropriation of Igbo Mythology in Akwaeke Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji*

A very unconventional way to start this chapter on *The Death of Vivek Oji* would be to highlight a recent conversation I had with another Nigerian scholar and doctoral researcher who is interrogating how Nigerian diasporans memorialise crisis. While discussing our thoughts on the non-binary Nigerian-Sri Lankan diasporic writer, Akwaeke Emezi, this friend mentioned that she had a hard time trusting rich people with platforms who weaponise their identity against the poor in ways she has seen them do against Nigerian audiences. She further argued that, even though their readership is not Nigeria-based, Emezi has been vocal about Nigeria in ways that make her question their actions and intentions. This is because they are of a mixed race, currently reside in the United States, and cannot fully lay claim to the ontological realities of the Igbos, even though they unequivocally identify as Nigerian. She then goes on to dismiss the *ogbanje* claim by Emezi as fetishistic, both as a way of construing themself and their character, Vivek, in the novel. And this is where I am picking up the conversation.

Akwaeke Emezi, who was born in Nigeria and has lived in the USA since the age of 16, has been widely acclaimed and well received by US and British critics and audiences as a significant voice for lesbian and trans people. In 2021, *Time* featured them as a Next Generation Leader, describing them as a "storyteller for a changing world", and one out of 30 trailblazers reaching for the future. They have also been distinguished as a *New York Times* bestselling author, a National Book Award finalist, and celebrated as a 5-Under-35 awardee by the National Book Foundation. Their book, *The Death of Vivek Oji*, won the Nommo Award in 2021 and was a finalist for the Dylan Thomas Prize that same year. This is in addition to the other (largely Western) awards and nominations they have received for their books in the last five years.

However, these many recognitions from Western institutions have not translated to noticeable recognition or acceptance on the home front, as Emezi is not a very popular name in Nigerian literary circles, and very little is written or read about them by literary critics and scholars based in Nigeria. Their books are not recommended in many school curricula in Nigeria, unlike those of Chimamanda Adichie, which are recommended texts in the secondary school and university curricula. In a nutshell, Emezi can be described as an outsider who, in the words of Chandrima Karmakar, grapples with the conundrum of home, and this "[e]ngagement with the idea of 'home' is not merely an intellectual quest for the diasporic [writer]. It is an engagement that helps them resolve their existential and identity issues" (80). By appropriating the concept of home and reconstructing its tradition, Emezi succeeds in alienating home-based readers instead of connecting with them like Adichie does. This makes them come across as inauthentic, flawed, and boundary-transgressing in many Nigerian readership circles. My friend who dismissed Emezi's obsession with the ogbanje trope as fetishistic is one of the probably five percent of Nigerians who know them as a writer, and their opinion can be said to be valid, as I hope to show in this chapter. But first, let me provide some background.

The Death of Vivek Oji is an inverted murder mystery about Vivek Oji, an *ogbanje* (reincarnated child), whose entire existence is enveloped in experiences of alienation and near-death encounters. Born to a Nigerian father, Chika and an Indian mother, Kavita, he finds himself as a female in a male body. But as often is the case in many African societies, Vivek's gender and sexuality are strongly resisted in his native Ngwa, a town in Abia State of southeastern Nigeria. Because of this, he is forced to deal with rejection from his immediate family and a very judgmental Igbo society which does not understand or appreciate the experiences of trans people. Every day of his life in that society revolves around avoiding possible death situations, until he is

accidentally killed by his cousin and partner, Osita, who is trying to get him to safety during a market riot and pulls him so hard that he stumbles and fatally hits his head on a stone. So, while the reader opens the book expecting to unravel a murder mystery, they soon discover that the novel is more about the plight of a trans person living in Nigeria.

Instructively, Emezi also claims to be both trans and an ogbanje. Narrating their gender affirming surgery experience to address the gender dysphoria they used to experience, they claim that the constant feeling of having another gender in their female body and their aversion to reproduction had similarities with the ogbanje phenomenon. However, they were not able to claim to be an ogbanje in the past because of their Western education and scientific background which tended to dismiss it as superstitious. According to them:

> Our language around gender identity is often so Western, how can we intersect that with non-Western realities? For example, is there a term for the dysphoria experienced by spirits who find themselves embodied in human form? It was inevitable that I'd be drawn to these overlaps, since I live there, inhabiting simultaneous realities that are usually considered mutually exclusive ("Transition", Online).

In a sense, Vivek is their own story intermixed with fiction, as they characterise Vivek as both an ogbanje and a trans person living in a hypercritical society.

Let me detour a bit to highlight one interesting note I find in Akwaeke Emezi's acknowledgments page. They mention Toni Morrison and Gabriel Marquez as the authors "whose books help me write this one" (264), but no mention is made of Chimamanda Adichie, their one-time creative writing teacher and mentor. Emezi's deliberate omission of Adichie can be largely traced to the conflicts they have had over the latter's public statements on transgender identities, which Emezi and other trans activists have termed transphobic and dangerous to the trans community. In an interview with Cathy Newman, Adichie argues that "trans women are

trans women", suggesting that their experiences cannot be equated with those of women born as women. Reacting to Adichie's position, Emezi accuses her of transphobia, and blames the establishment for platforming her, despite knowing about her bias against trans people. Even though Adichie dismissed the attacks by Emezi and other trans activists as "trans noise" at a South African book festival in 2018 where she was a guest (Samanga, Online), and further responded to the cancel culture in a 2021 article, the debate is far from over. The animated arguments would readily suggest that they are two Nigerian writers on different divides of contemporary African and global feminisms. While Adichie might be regarded as a writer who, quoting Kate Bornstein, does not "have much flexibility when it comes to grasping the mechanics of changing genders" (1), Emezi, on the other hand, appears to push gender boundaries to the point of fetishization, to borrow the word of my friend.

However, a closer look at Chimamanda Adichie's collection of stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck* and Akwaeke Emezi's third novel, *The Death of Vivek Oji,* points to more similarities than differences in their creative thinking and writing processes. For instance, the sexual relationship between two cousins, Vivek and Osita, in Emezi's novel finds a parallel in Dozie and the second-person narrator in Adichie's "Tomorrow is too Far", even though one is homosexual while the second is heterosexual; the secret behind Nonso's death in the same story is comparable to the mystery surrounding Vivek's death; and the motif of reincarnation where Vivek is represented as Ahunna in a male body is also found in "The Headstrong Historian", where Afamefuna is presented as a reincarnated Obierika in a female body. All these similarities and possible influences nonetheless, Emezi does not consider Adichie's brand of feminism as advocative enough, particularly because she does not take a categorical trans-affirmative stand, and therefore calls for her to be deplatformed. In their opinion, Adichie is a trans-exclusionary

radical feminist (TERF), whose opinions are very harmful to trans people, and this is even more significant, considering Adichie's weighty influence as a popular feminist in the 21st century. By calling for Adichie's deplatforming, Emezi was only recommending the same fate that befell J.K. Rowling, after she opined that trans-men only choose to transition as a way of escaping the burdens of womanhood. Fissures and tensions among feminist, gay, lesbian, and trans movements and organizations are not new and have occurred for many decades during contemporary feminist movements globally. While these tensions can deplete activists' energy and dilute their power, they can also expose exclusionary blind spots within movements.

Beyond their perceived differences, it is important to look at how the feminist worldviews of Adichie and Emezi coalesce into a continuum. While Adichie affirms the position of LGBTQ people in the Nigerian society, Emezi narrates the lived experiences of a transgender person in Ngwa, a highly conservative Igbo town in southeastern Nigeria. As the friend whom I referenced earlier believes, Emezi's feminist ideology could be said to be performative, but one question that arises has to do with the particular audience they have in mind, as transgender conversations are not currently very popular in Nigeria. Reading through the novel, one can easily identify with the strong emotion of anger underlying the character construction and the development of the theme. As Emezi tries to highlight the difficult composition of the self in a world fixated on binaries, they are unequivocal about the factors that further shrink the space of LGBTQAI+ participation in Nigeria.

Religion, Tradition, and a Gendered Appropriation of the *Ogbanje* Trope

According to bell hooks, any future feminist struggle must be founded on "a recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression", as any feminist reform that fails to challenge and change these philosophical

structures will not have any significant impact (*Feminist Theory* 31). By implication, the responsibility of every feminist writer is to both identify and eliminate any root causes of sexism, and this is what Emezi sets out to do in the novel. One of the contested spaces Emezi seeks to reclaim through this novel is the ground lost to community tradition and religion. Through the major characters and significant developments in the story, both tradition and religion are constantly presented as flawed, preventing trans people from surviving and thriving in Nigeria. In a conversation with Esme Wang, Emezi highlights the overarching desire by many Nigerian Christians to rename or refashion everything that does not have a Christian name or concept, given their ultra-religious tendencies. Names that have their origin in the Igbo ancestral belief system are either changed or rebranded to sound like Christian names. According to Emezi, this is the reason for Vivek's periodic fugues, as his parents wrongly assign him a gender without trying to understand what gender he was going to manifest. Despite the many signs that he is the reincarnation of Chika's mother, Ahunna, they refuse to acknowledge what they refer to as superstition, the reason for which Emezi claims his life is in perpetual turmoil. Drawing from their own experience while growing up, they argue that parents assume the gender of the child and worry about the spiritual repercussions if the child turns out to be something different from their biological sex. Ifi Amadiume expands this problem further, as she believes that biological sex does not correspond to ideological gender when it comes to social classification in the African context. Instead, "[d]epending on gender systems, men can be reclassified as females and vice versa" (112). However, she identifies the linguistic and historical differences between the European and African systems as the root cause of the gender manipulation that is experienced in practice, despite the flexibility of gender in African systems (112).

The issue of gender conformity is at the heart of Emezi's novel, as Vivek is alienated by the Nigerian society and the Christian religion because he does not fit into the gender binaries constructed by tradition and religion. The attitude towards people born as a particular gender but who choose to identify as something else is usually that of ostracism. Busangokwakhe Diami informs that, "although families may accept that a male member does not marry and produce children, they often make major efforts to discourage public gender nonconformity on his part" (134). We see this playing out in Chika's home, as he and Kavita are concerned about how their son will be perceived outside, bearing in mind that he appears feminine. They believe that people could attack him under the guise of tradition or religion, in a bid to enforce whatever they believe is right. Through the character of Mary, Emezi foregrounds the dangers inherent in fanatical Christianity, as religious dogmas completely replace commonsense. This behaviour ends up distorting their family dynamics, as it alienates everyone from her. First, her husband, Ekene, starts avoiding coming home because he now dreads sharing the same physical space with her, while her son, Osita, spends more time with his cousin, Vivek. Even Kavita is not left out, as we are told that she:

> Sometimes…missed her sister-in-law, but whenever that pain showed up in her chest, she reminded herself that the Mary of today was not the same Mary she'd known all those years ago. You lost that sister a long time ago; she's gone, just like Ahunna. The only difference is that her body is still walking around. (44)

For anyone wondering what could have happened to make Kavita adopt that extreme way of looking at Mary, one instance comes to mind among many others. Faced with a child who is losing weight because of lack of appetite, Kavita takes Vivek to the Catholic Church cathedral to see Father Obinna, instead of taking him to the hospital. When he does not seem to improve, she

is convinced by Mary to send him over to Owerri, where he is subjected to painful inhuman treatment in the name of a spiritual exercise known as deliverance. Vivek recalls the experience:

> "They are bastards!" he spat. "You think it's all right to treat someone as if they're an animal? In the name of their useless deliverance? Mba, wait. They called it an exorcism. Because, apparently, I have a demon in me, did you know? They had to beat it out." He lifted up his shirt, revealing a swath of dark red welts on his side. (81)

For a boy who is sick and in need of urgent medical and psychological care, Mary rather takes him to her church for a 'deliverance session' where Vivek is physically and emotionally tortured. When Kavita confronts Mary on the phone over that incident, Mary tells her that the person being flogged was not Vivek, but the demon inside him (82). As baffling as her response is, she does not consider it necessary to retract the explanation and apologise for her blind devotion to a dehumanising practice that is meted out by her pastor.

A popular trope in African cultural and spiritual frameworks is the interaction of physical and metaphysical worlds. A further dive into this mythology unfolds different strands of beliefs like predestination, determinism, and reincarnation, and one of the most prominent of these tropes is reincarnation. Simply put, it is the belief that human beings, usually ancestors or forbears, come back to life through new bodies after they die, and are easily identifiable by birthmarks or certain scars that they had while they were alive. In the Igbo tradition, as mentioned above, such reincarnated beings are referred to as *ogbanje*, while the Yorubas of South-West Nigeria refer to them as *abiku*, the title of Wole Soyinka and J.P. Clark's poems. According to Ato Quayson, the child is always in an endless cycle of births, deaths and re-births, and the community is usually at the mercy of the disruptive and arbitrary cycle of this spirit-child, if its links to the spirit world are not broken (122-23). Chikwenye Ogunyemi suggests that the "metaphysical idea of abiku/ogbanje and the notion of a rebirth serve as a master-narrative of

the parent-child relationship in Pan-African socio-political contexts and literary texts" (663). In a sense, the ancestor coming back as a newborn in the family of their grown child is a way of reaffirming their love for their children, demonstrated by their reluctance to leave the earth completely. Hence, reincarnation comes with a certain fondness, as the grown child who has now become a parent enjoys the privilege of having their late parent coming back to them as their own child. But such reentrance into the world is often short-lived, as the *ogbanje/abiku* is often expected to live for a short time before dying again, thus repeating that entire cycle again and again. Timothy Mobolade explains it thus:

> Owing to the ephemeral nature of its life, an Abiku completes several consecutive life-cycles with one mother. Practically every attempt of the parents to prevent the Abiku's death proves abortive because, by its nature, the Abiku is shrouded in mystery. By means of its occult powers the Abiku destroys itself, leaving the parents dejected and frustrated. (62)

By implication, the ultimate destiny of the *ogbanje* is death, and it is important to keep this in mind as we review the story of Vivek as an *ogbanje*. Right from the first couple of pages, Emezi does not hesitate to point to the reincarnation of Chika's mother, Ahunna, through their new son, Vivek:

> On the day Vivek was born, Chika had held the baby in his arms and stared at that scar. He'd seen it before—Kavita always commented on its shape whenever she rubbed Ahunna's feet… How else could that scar have entered the world on flesh if it had not left in the first place? A thing cannot be in two places at once. But still, he denied this for many years, for as long as he could. Superstition, he said. It was a coincidence, the marks on their feet—and besides, Vivek was a boy and not a girl, so how can? Still. His mother was dead and their family was bereft, and in the middle of all this was a new baby. (12-13)

Chika and Kavita have their new baby, Vivek, a day after Chika's mother, Ahunna dies, and they notice a brown starfish-like mark on his body which had been on her foot too. Without a doubt, Vivek is Ahunna reincarnated, but Chika refuses to acknowledge this because of his Christian

belief. Ironically, the reason Vivek is having periodic blackouts is because of the gender contradiction he is facing. While the Igbo tradition recognises and celebrates reincarnation through names like Nnamdi (my father is alive) and Nnemdi (my mother is alive), the Christian religion has no place for it in its ideology. Because Chika and Kavita are practising Christians, they refuse to give him the rightful name that he should have had, seeing that he is a reincarnation of Chika's mother. In a sense, Vivek therefore becomes the casualty following the clash between Christianity and the traditional religion.

However, Vivek is not only an *ogbanje*, but he is also a transgender person, as he finds himself a female trapped in a male body. It is not enough that Chika's mother comes back to the world through him, she also uses his body as an agency for manifesting all her feminine tendencies and desires. Ironically, this puts Vivek in a difficult position, as he finds himself in a society that has little or no room for transgender people. Despite the love Chika had for his mother, he finds it difficult to relate with Vivek, who is his mother's reincarnation. This presents the issue of gender dysphoria in conservative societies where such a phenomenon is either novel or completely outlawed (and therefore underground). In such places, gender distinction is clearly between male and female, and anything else in between is not welcome, thereby exposing anyone who identifies as trans, nonbinary, or gender-nonconforming to isolation and possible harm. Mark Yarhouse asks some burning questions:

> When a child is gender dysphoric, how should parents respond? Should parents raise a gender dysphoric child in the identity of the child's biological sex? Should they facilitate cross-gender identification? Or should they take a "wait and see" posture with the assumption that the right direction for that child is what will unfold? (15)

Vivek's parents find themselves in this dilemma, as they do not know whether to watch him grow into a trans person rejected by society or use force to make him fit into the expected gender

box that the society has created for him. Osita recounts the reason Chika decided for Vivek to attend a military school in the north was because he "wanted him to toughen up, to stop being so soft and sensitive" (15). By the time we get to the end of the story, Chika and Kavita are forced to come to terms with a reality they had denied for so long, and Kavita admits: "[w]e can't keep insisting he was who we thought he was, when he wanted to be someone else and he died being that person, Chika" (243). On his tombstone, Kavita makes Chika finally add "Nnemdi" to Vivek's name, to read: "VIVEK NNEMDI OJI: BELOVED CHILD" (262), after they had lived all their lives denying his incarnation. By way of problematising the pronoun problem, Emezi also changes Vivek's pronoun to the feminine gender, to align with the societal acceptance that he receives in death. By so doing, they succinctly foreground the fluidity of gender, as someone being addressed as a 'he' soon changes to 'she'.

Interesting as the story might be, an average Igbo reader would have some unanswered questions about Emezi's plot. Does Vivek die because he is a homosexual or trans person living in a highly trans- and homophobic society, or because it is the ordained fate of every *ogbanje* to die young without living to their fullest potential? Approaching the novel from the standpoint of an *ogbanje* narrative, anyone who understands the trope of the *ogbanje* in the Igbo metaphysics would expect the death of Vivek somewhere down the line. However, Vivek believes that he died because, "I was dancing with death every day, especially when I walked outside like that. I knew it, and I made my choices anyway" (262). On one hand, we are told that death was apparent on that very day because of how he dressed – fully like a girl and wanting to be accepted like that by the world. On the other hand, it is the typical *ogbanje* story, as Vivek says, "I was born and I died. I will come back" (263), which is the cyclical occurrence of the reincarnation myth. By

mixing elements of trans ways of being and the *ogbanje* myth, local readers will largely consider it an inauthentic rendering of the trope as originally construed by the Igbo tradition.

Heteronormative Relationships in Perpetual Ruin

In the previous chapters, one motif that has been consistent is the failure of the marriage institution, as the union between every husband and wife is flawed in one way or the other. But this theme is also present in *The Death of Vivek Oji*, as we discover that every heteronormative relationship is dysfunctional, and this includes even relationships between children and young adults. All the families in the novel are dysfunctional, and we get an x-ray into the union of different couples through an association of foreign women married to Nigerian men, known as Nigerwives. The constant conflicts in their respective homes only end up drawing their different children closer as friends, thereby creating a community that they did not plan for originally.

Right from the beginning of the novel, Emezi presents a picture of flawed heterosexual relationships when, as a single man, Chika attempts to commit adultery with Mary, his brother Ekene's wife, while she is still staying with her mother-in-law in the village. The strong attraction he feels for her overwhelms him one day and he begins to kiss her neck, only for Mary to start "beating him with the long wooden spoon she was using to make garri" (6). On one hand, there is the crime of molestation, and on the other hand, the unpardonable crime of attempted incest, but Mary's response suggests something more sinister: "What's your problem, ehn? Why must you try and spoil everything? Ekene and I are happy, you hear? We're happy" (6). From her response, it appears there is a certain desperation to make even herself believe that she and her husband are happy as a couple. As the story unfolds, we notice that there is no emotional connection between her and Ekene, and they only have their son, Osita, as one reason they are together. The union between Chika and Kavita is not much different. They have a loveless

relationship between them, with Chika being a more conservative personality, compared to Kavita's liberal worldview. One issue they often argue about is his desperation to make Vivek conform to the image that the Christian religion defines for a boy, and when Vivek deviates from that, Chika concludes that he looks like a mad man. But his selective piety comes to the fore when we get to learn about his adulterous lifestyle:

> Chika watched as Eloise scrambled up from her knees in his office, her cheeks flushed and red. She was smiling as she wiped her mouth, a smile that puzzled and annoyed him, as vacantly good-natured as if she'd just passed him the salt at dinner. He tucked himself back into his trousers and zipped them up, watching her adjust her blouse to cover her breasts. (111)

The striking thing about this adulterous relationship is that Chika and Eloise are married, and she is also Kavita's friend and one of the Nigerwives. She is described as "short and plump, with thick sandy hair and a perpetual smile" (18), and has a husband who is a doctor at the teaching hospital. Their marriage is blessed with grown up children who are schooling in the United Kingdom, and instead of spending more time with her husband, Eloise and Chika are busy breaking their marriage vows. Kavita also realises at some point that the relationship between both of them has become stale and observes that:

> It was how he always did nowadays, pushing her aside gently, not listening to her. Sometimes it felt like he had stopped listening to her years ago, and she just hadn't noticed. Like they were living in two separate worlds that happened to be under the same roof, pressed against each other, but never spilling, never overlapping. (92)

Notwithstanding that they lived together because of marriage, it was two separate worlds that never came together, and one wonders why they continued as husband and wife. One reason that could be adduced for this is the societal emphasis on marriage as the ultimate fulfilment for every woman. After Vivek's death, Kavita goes in search of Osita, so she could retrieve the

jewelry that her son was wearing before his death, but when she gets to Osita's hotel room in Port Harcourt, we read:

> Now, standing in her nephew's hotel room, she felt a little jealous. If she could have run away and fallen apart like this, doing God-knows-what with God-knows-who, she would have done so in a heartbeat. But she had a husband, and useless as he was, he was something she didn't want to leave, not now. (44)

From the above, we see Kavita as someone locked in a prison that is not of her own making, and eagerly desirous of freedom. But then, she does not have the liberty to discard Chika and the marriage just like people she might have done in other circumstances, despite acknowledging that he had become useless to her.

Another marriage we get to read about is that of the local vulcaniser, Ebenezer, who is married to Chisom, a trader in the market, and they have no children. After many years of Chisom visiting the hospital for fertility tests and treatments, she asks him to also try to see a doctor, as the problem might be from him. But then, in many African societies, if couples do not have children, it is believed that the problem must be from the woman, just the same way it is wrongly believed that the woman determines the sex of every child, and a woman always having female children must be replaced by another woman. Ebenezer dismissed the suggestion and mentions it to his brother, who goes on to tell other members of the family, despite knowing that they never liked her in the first place. As a result, "Chisom stopped speaking to her husband because of it, and they started to move around each other like strangers" (157), and despite missing his wife, Ebenezer refuses to apologise. Instead, he chooses to "look more at other women—not with intent, just a lazy wondering, about what kind of wives they would have been" (157). He ends up maintaining an adulterous relationship with Mama Ben, the food seller, while also lusting after another woman, a widow known as Florence. All of these continue while he watches his marriage deteriorate beyond repair.

Other marriages that we read about in the novel are flawed, with some of the spouses having extramarital affairs to emotionally escape from their partners, and it does not matter the social status they belong to. Among all the Nigerwives, there is no one who has a working marriage. Elizabeth is from a dysfunctional home, as her parents are separated, while Aunty Ruby has a daycare but keeps her earnings from her husband. Aunty Rhatha's husband worked abroad and she "seemed to get along just fine without him" (18). For Juju, she was "fairly sure that her father was having an affair and that her parents weren't telling her about it, which didn't make sense because the secret was too big, too loud" (142), and at night, she would "hear the familiar thuds of his hands hitting her mother" (106). Apart from the emotional violence that adultery signified, Juju's father was also engaged in domestic violence against his wife, and when he finally moved away from the house, "the air in their house was calm and they could move a bit more freely" (143). As we encounter these different marriages, we see a lot of parallels with the marriages in Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck,* and the only reason these couples are together is because of the stereotyping that often comes with divorce and broken marriages. This can be traced to the unconscious tensions that exist in societies where gender and sexual discrimination exist.

LGBTQ Writing and a New Normalisation of Sex

In her essay, "The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century", Lindsey Green-Simms argues that the silence and opacity about homosexuality that used to characterise earlier Nigerian writing has not only eroded, but turned to a polyphony, thanks to a new cohort of writers known as the third generation. Despite the array of queer characters in contemporary Nigerian fiction, she points out that "there has been relatively little critical attention to these queer emergences in African writing" (141). The dearth of critical

responses to this emergent kind of literature points to an unwillingness to engage with the motif of gay relationships in an ultra-conservative Nigerian society. Akwaeke Emezi confronts this predilection in *The Death of Vivek Oji,* choosing to explore what they refer to as gender expansiveness instead of the linear shift of gender transition (see their interview with Esme Wang).

As the story progresses, we read about characters who start out by expressing complete indignation towards the idea of homosexuality, only for them to come face to face with their desires at some point. Osita, Vivek's cousin, is outraged the first time Vivek suggests that he could be visiting Nsukka to have sexual relations with a fellow male:

> "Wait." I felt as if my head was stuffed with surprise. "If it's not a woman, who else would I be seeing in Nsukka?"
>
> Vivek looked at me, and there was a pause before I realized what he meant. I sat up, furious. "Are you mad? What's wrong with you!
>
> ...I pulled away and jumped off the bed...I slapped the palms of my hands against each other, as if dusting off the contagion of his thoughts. (71-72)

Recounting the experience, Osita informs us that his "stomach was knotted and painful" (72). But amid such outrage, Emezi uses Vivek as a voice calling both Osita and the society to think beyond the gender binaries and sexual paradigms that they have held dear for so long. Unusually calm in the face of Osita's protest, Vivek asks: "Why are you so afraid? Because something is different from what you know?" (73). He then goes on to register his disappointment, insisting that, "I didn't think you'd be one of these closed-minded people. Leave that for your mother" (73).

Beyond the verbal disapproval from Osita, Vivek also faces a potentially violent form of censure from society. His mother, Kavita, is always concerned about how he is being perceived

by their neighbours, and during a conversation with Mary, Osita's mother, her fears are further exacerbated:

> Ahn! Kavita. You know how things are here. It's not safe for him to be walking around Ngwa looking that . . . feminine. If someone misunderstands, if they think he's a homosexual, what do you think is going to happen to him?"
>
> Kavita's stomach dropped. The thought had worried her, too, but it was different—more terrifying—to hear it put into words. Vivek couldn't end up like those lynched bodies at the junction, blackened by fire and stiffened, large gashes from machetes showing old red flesh underneath. Most of them were thieves, or said to be thieves, but mobs don't listen, and they'd say anything afterward. (75-76)

It is poignant to note that Vivek's society categorizes homosexuality as a criminal offence, just like stealing and other social vices. And, in a society where the mob periodically takes the law into its hands whenever it is convenient, Vivek is not safe to walk on the streets. This experience is not peculiar to Vivek alone, as there is an indication that many homosexuals in Nigeria are often exposed to danger because of who they are. Deborah Amory stresses that "there is growing evidence that African men and women are being actively persecuted on the basis of their sexual practices and identities" (5), and this is even more so in Nigeria where religion, the law, and tradition are triangular forces fighting against such practice. Vivek's entire existence is characterised by an endless struggle for survival, as she navigates the hate and alienation that she experiences in the hands of many people in society. A desperation to force her into a certain kind of gender conformity leaves her with periodic fugues which further alienate her from people, and she constantly bemoans the refusal to understand and accept her for who she is:

> I'm not what anyone thinks I am. I never was. I didn't have the mouth to put it into words, to say what was wrong, to change the things I felt I needed to change. And every day it was difficult, walking around and knowing that people saw me one way, knowing that they were wrong, so completely wrong, that the real me was invisible to them. It didn't even exist to them.
>
> So: If nobody sees you, are you still there? (40)

In the above passage, the reader is forced to interrogate how society relates with difference, especially when it has to do with gender and sexuality. Ironically, the same people who openly condemn gay relationships sometimes end up embracing it in their closets. Despite Osita's initial indignation, a desire that he never knew or acknowledged was there soon gets the better of him, as he ends up maintaining a sexual relationship with his cousin until his death.

In the novel, Emezi highlights a major challenge that gay people face in Nigeria, as a result of living in closets. Osita and other gay or bisexual people escape the scrutiny of society, as long as they continue their lifestyle in secret, but as soon as it comes to the open, such people are victimised and subjected to targeted harassment. The first time Osita experiences any homosexual advances, it is at a "small, dark club" which is representative of the underground gay clubs in some of Nigeria's big cities. Bogged by a strong feeling of guilt for how he had treated Vivek in the past, Osita feels compelled to own up to him about:

> The young university student who leaned in to kiss me in a smoky corner, and the way I allowed it, allowed him even though anyone could look and see us; allowed his tongue to push into my mouth, even kissing him back before I came to my senses and pushed him away and left. About how he tried to talk to me about it the next day, bright-faced and eager, how panicked I felt because I didn't know what he thought I could give him, what world he thought we lived in where it was safe to do something like that. (132-33)

Osita is shocked at how he instinctively welcomes the homoerotic experience, despite his earlier condemnation of homosexuality. In response, Vivek asks: "[w]hy didn't you just keep it a secret? Isn't that what everyone does?" (133). By his response, he is suggesting that non-normative sexualities are more prevalent than people would care to admit, and the only reason people remain in closets is because of the harsh censorship given to such issues in the society. He is not the only one who indulges in this, as we also get to read about Elizabeth and Jukwase (Juju), two of his mutual female friends, who also maintain a lesbian relationship. Juju, who happens to have

some masculine qualities, suddenly notices that "[s]he had been looking at girls that way, with an interest in the texture of their flesh" (149-50), and when Elizabeth finally visits her house, Elizabeth summons the courage to kiss her after Juju had spent some time admiring Elizabeth's body. Juju's response to her is instructive: "You don't need to be so afraid," she'd said. "I like you, too" (150). What Emezi seems to be saying with this encounter is that sexuality cannot be the linear construction that society has made it out to be, and that the reason many people do not give themselves the permission to experience sexual wholesomeness is because they are often concerned about what others will say.

One of the vices that institutionalized homophobia breeds is the danger of homosexual rape and blackmail for those who are not able to come forward with their sexualities. A recent BBC Africa Eye documentary, "Kito: Blackmailing LGBT Nigeria", shows different instances where people take advantage of gay people and blackmail them into parting with their money. In some other instances, these same gay people are raped by people who claim to be offended by their lifestyle. The irony is scathing, as supposedly straight people engage in homosexual acts all in a bid to correct a practice they claim to detest. Seeing that homosexuality is criminalised in Nigeria, gay people find themselves between a rock and a hard place, as filing formal complaints with law enforcement agents would mean exposing themselves to another round of victimisation and targeting by the same law officers. After Vivek dies, Osita leaves home and spends much of his time in Port Harcourt, seeking to be away from anything that reminded him of Vivek. While in Port Harcourt, we are informed that, "Osita had fucked only women—it had been like that since Vivek died. It felt safer, as if he wasn't giving any important parts of himself away: not his soul or heart, just his body, which didn't matter anyway" (48). But that unspoken covenant to preserve the sexual memories he had with Vivek is suddenly violated by a Lebanese man who

breaks into his hotel room when he is drunk and rapes him. This action by a stranger feels particularly violent because of the history Osita has with Vivek, and the "chasm in his chest was riddled with pain, as his mind compared memories of Vivek's touch with that of the stranger in the hotel room" (49). Unfortunately, he cannot report such criminality to the law enforcement agents, and he has to live with the memory of that unjust crime for the rest of his life.

One thing that is not lost on the reader is how Emezi normalises sexuality as ever-present, rather than something not discussed, and their foregrounding of non-normative sexualities as commonplace in the novel. In many African societies, and particularly in the Igbo culture, sex is largely an act without a name, and mostly referred to metaphorically. However, Emezi breaks away from this known convention, choosing to spare the reader the pain of filling in the gaps, and instead, describing both homo and heterosexual acts in graphic detail. Green-Simms says that this is characteristic of the third-generation writers, who have "begun to tackle themes previously taboo in African literature" (141). Whether it is the heterosexual experiences between Osita and one of their female friends, Elizabeth, or the many homosexual experiences with Vivek, there is a lot of sex in the novel. In Emezi's conversation with Wang, they mention that they felt a need to build a sense of community among Vivek and his friends, seeing that they all came from dysfunctional homes. But as we see, the community is largely about sexual identities and practices among them, which is not a very common occurrence (or at least not openly acknowledged) in the society that Emezi tries to represent. Nonetheless, their preoccupation is on reconstructing paradigms and forcing society to reevaluate the things it considers taboo. By provocative and polemical, she is proving true Green-Simms's proposal that the twenty-first century Nigerian and Nigerian diasporic writing tries "to resist the dominant in ways not previously done before and to tell diverse stories about same-sex desire that are neither

monothematic nor moralistic" (142). Terry Eagleton submits that the "goal of a feminist politics would therefore be not an affirmation of some "female identity," but a troubling and subverting of all such sexual straitjacketing (23-24). In this novel, Emezi appears to achieve that with their reconstruction of gender and sexual paradigms.

In this chapter, I have sought to understand how Emezi's novel constructs sexually and gender nonconforming characters and plot lines in a hybridised relationship with traditional Igbo mythologies and metaphysics. While their appropriation of the ogbanje trope attempts to trace the notion and existence of transgender persons to the Igbo cosmology, they ignore the implied fate of such ogbanje children, which is ultimately birth, death and rebirth in an endless cyclical manner. Additionally, I have sought to think through the ways that they create relationships both within Nigeria and between Nigerians and outsiders (e.g., the Nigerwives). In a sense, they mirror their own childhood and growing up experiences in Enugu, Nigeria, through Vivek's childhood and teenage family relationships.

Conclusion

In this thesis, my focus has been to reclaim feminist criticism from the broad lenses of globality and situate it in particular Nigerian localities, with specific attention on the construction and reception of some feminist ideologies in local contexts. To achieve this, I have carefully examined the representation of gender and sexual politics in fiction by three contemporary Nigeria n writers, Chimamanda Adichie, Akwaeke Emezi, and Razinat Mohammed, focusing largely on their strands of divergence under a larger umbrella of radical feminism. And if there is ever a question about the relevance of this, the answer is evident in the lived experiences of Habiba, Kande, Ujunwa, Vivek, Elizabeth, Osita, and other characters that we find in the novels, as they represent human experiences beyond the concepts we find in textbooks on feminism, gender and sexual politics.

Chapter one provides a background to the study, as I painstakingly review feminist ideologies by some of the leading Third World Feminists like bell hooks, Patricia Collins, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Audre Lorde, Ifi Amadiume, Chandra Mohanty, Rosalind King, and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie. To situate their worldviews in the larger body of feminist thought, I also introduce thoughts from some renowned Western feminists like Judith Butler and Kate Millett, repurposing their comments for twenty-first-century relevance. At the core of these arguments is the realisation that sisterhood in the framework of Western feminist ideology only succeeds in excluding the unique experiences of feminists in other global spaces. Notably, the reception of concepts like homosexuality and transness in many Nigerian societies has been largely hostile, and the passage of the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act in 2014 only gave legal imprimatur to what is regarded as the popular sentiment in the society. Contextualising these authors' worldviews in the societies reflected in their novels provides us a

very good background for understanding and relating with the words on the pages of their works and the obvious silences. It also helps us understand the practicability or impracticability of global concepts when applied in local contexts.

In chapter two, I closely examine Mohammed's *Habiba* as an outlier in an ultra-religious and conservative northern Nigeria, where the women are often regarded as appendages of men. Boxed into a corner by a religion and culture that believe in the total subordination of women, Habiba navigates her way through experiences of rejection and child marriage, after she is forced to marry Zubairu, a man that is old enough to be her grandfather. However, the liberatory potential of lesbianism comes to the fore, as she engages in intimate relations with Rabi, one of her co-wives, as a way of rejecting the sexual domination of her aging husband. The emotional stability she finds in the arms of Rabi must remain covert, nonetheless, as anything that openly distorts the social order might be severely penalised with punishments like death by stoning, as commonly practised in northern Nigeria. It is important to mention that, despite Mohammed's revolutionary fervour, her feminist vision is neutralised by her geographical location, as she cannot be seen to openly canvas against anything her religion and culture support. For example, when Mohammed attempts to question the infallibility of parents and the religious demand for children to obey them, she makes sure that it is a male character, Sadia, who is questioning it. And when she finally turns to lesbianism as a way of circumventing patriarchal authority, she makes sure that it is something that is done under the cover of metaphorical sheets.

Chapter three focuses on revisioning different societal assumptions about men and women, together with sexuality and gender roles, as Adichie foregrounds the overarching implications of masculine privilege and feminine subjugation in Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora. In trying to work a broad transformation upon societal notions of the feminine and

masculine, she presents males that are completely flawed and women that are revolting against such flaws. This contradicts the ubiquitous representation of the woman in many African novels as flawed and a necessary evil who only exists for procreation and the sole pleasure of men. In projecting her cosmopolitan vision and authorial freedom, the diasporic influences on her feminist thought cannot be mistaken. While she is not completely opposed to heterosexual relationships (as we see in the relationship between Akunna and her white boyfriend), Adichie also believes that homosexuality can serve as the gateway to freedom when heterosexual relationships begin to choke the woman. As unpopular as this view might be in Nigeria, she is able to canvas it because she is not at the mercy of a highly censorial Nigerian audience, both from a spatial standpoint and from a marketing angle. Tracing the metamorphosis of her feminist vision, Adichie oscillates between what Gloria Fwangyil refers to as a reformist-feminist perspective in *Purple Hibiscus* (264) and an uber-radical feminist in *The Thing Around Your Neck,* as women become more impatient with the flaws of men and reject them whenever they can.

In chapter four, I engage in a detailed critique of Emezi's *The Death of Vivek Oji,* demonstrating how the novel is unnatural even in an Igbo society that is not as conservative as the northern Nigeria that we read about in Mohammed's *Habiba*. While a Western critic might consider Emezi as an author who engages some Igbo practices with a very critical eye, a local reader might consider them as engaging in a narrow advocacy of LGBTQ+ rights, whilst completely disconnected and alienated from the traditional practices they try to project in the novel. Their main character, Vivek, is an *ogbanje*, the reincarnation of Chika's mother, but he comes in a male body, which legitimises his transness and the gender dysphoria he feels very often. But then, the ultimate fate of an *ogbanje* is death, which invalidates the argument that

Vivek's death is as a result of his rejection by society for not conforming to a particular societal gender construct. A counterpoint would be that they are attempting to bring cosmopolitan and Western-centric ideas about gender and sexuality to Nigerian readerships, but their novels evince tensions between their uptake by Western readers and potential disconnects with domestic readers in Nigeria. Simply put, Emezi writes for white audiences, but uses Nigerianness as a marketing tool, and this explains their wide reception and multiple awards in the West, despite their relatively unknown status in Nigeria. They are often regarded as the perfect picture of the progressive black feminist construing gender and sexuality in new ways, regardless of the strong opposition to such concepts in their home country. By filling this supposed gap, Emezi is serving the interests of the first-world intellectuals and Western do-gooders, who, according to Spivak, often masquerade "as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves" (292).

Applying the intellectual instruments that gender, feminism and queer studies provide, I have argued that some of the motifs in the three novels are informed by different intersectional factors and the respective authors' different orientation to gender. These authors are working from different positions with respect to Nigeria as a place: Mohammed located in a place in Nigeria and writing to that location; Adichie who bestrides both home and diaspora both in a literal and literary sense, and writing for white and Nigerian audiences; and then Emezi, who writes solely for a Western audience. But then, one motif that is consistent across the three novels is the indictment of patriarchal and heterosexual relationships, which creates an overarching necessity for homosexual relationships. Book after book, we see the key characters turning to queer, trans or same-sex relationships as a way of breaking free, undermining or resisting the deep-rooted abuse and exploitation of women.

Despite the proliferation of African feminist voices attempting to overthrow patriarchal and heterosexual relationships, it might be difficult for homosexual relationships to take root in Africa, considering the new wave of legislations against LGBTQ+ people in Africa. Kenya, Uganda and Ghana are the most recent among African countries that have either passed the anti-gay law or are planning to do so. The fact that the citizens of these countries are fully supportive of such move, even in the face of many arm-twisting efforts of Western governments and developmental partners, is an indication that gay rights and other forms of sexual expressions that go against the traditionally accepted sexual practices will continue to remain unpopular in Africa for a long time. Notwithstanding, there would likely be more feminist writers in the near future, creating alternate realities in their literary works where LGBTQ+ issues move from the margin to the centre, as a form of protest against the societal censorship of such practices.

Works Cited

Primary Texts

Adichie, Chimamanda. *The Thing Around Your Neck.* Fourth Estate, 2009.

Emezi, Akwaeke. *The Death of Vivek Oji*. Riverhead, 2020.

Mohammed, Razinat. *Habiba.* Kraftbooks, 2013.

Secondary Texts

Adichie, Chimamanda. *We Should All Be Feminists.* Anchor, 2015.

---. *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*. Vintage, 2017.

Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Bloomsbury, 1987.

---. *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion, and Culture*. Bloomsbury, 1997.

Ba, Mariama. *So long a letter.* Heinemann, 1981.

Baron, Dennis. "The Epicene Pronoun: The Word That Failed". *American Speech*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 1981, pp. 83-97.

BBC Africa Eye, 2023. "Kito: Blackmailing LGBT Nigeria". https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTXQFig2LsI. Accessed on May 19, 2023.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. and Ed. by H.M. Parshley. Jonathan Cape, 1953.

Bilby, Kenneth and Steady, Filomina. "Black Women and Survival: A Marron Case". *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. Ed. by Filomina Steady. Cambridge, 1981, pp. 451-67.

Bornstein, Kate. *My Gender Workbook*. Routledge, 1998.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 2011.

---. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 1988, pp. 519-31.

Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Routledge, 2000.

---. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Routledge, 2004.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour". *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*. Ed. by Crenshaw, Kimberlé; Gotanda, Neil; Peller, Gary; and Thomas, Kendall. New Press, 1995, pp. 357-83.

Curiel, Ochy. "The Contributions of Afro-descendant Women to Feminist Theory and Practice: Deuniversalizing the Subject "Women"". *Hypatia*, 37, 2022, pp. 478-92.

Dangaremba, Tsitsi. *Nervous conditions.* Seal Press, 1988.

Davies, Carole. "Some Notes on African Feminism". *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2010, pp. 561-69.

Desai, Guarav. "Out in Africa". *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2010, pp. 736-45.

Diami, Busangokwakhe. "Homosexuality in the African Context". *African Feminisms: Homosexuality*. Agenda, Vol. 2&3, No 67, 2006, pp. 128-36.

Dunton, Chris. 1989. ""Wheyting Be Dat?": The Treatment of Homosexuality in African Literature". *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2010, pp. 727-35.

Eagleton, Terry, Jameson, Fredric, and Said, Edward: *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*. University of Minnesota, 1990.

El Saadawi, Nawal. 1980. "The Heroine in Arab Literature". *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2010, pp. 520-25.

Emecheta, Buchi. *The Joys of Motherhood*. Alison and Busby, 1979.

---. 1986. “Feminism with a Small ‘F’”. *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2007, pp. 551-57.

Emezi, Akwaeke. “Transitions: My Surgeries Were a Bridge across Realities, a Spirit Customizing its Vessel to Reflect its Nature.” http://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/law/documents/Transition.pdf. Retrieved on February 1, 2023.

Epstein, Heidi. "Chastening Tale: Figuring Woman across the Christian Fundamentalist/Feminist Divide". *Fundamentalism and Women in World Religions*. Edited by Arvind Sharma and Katherine Young. T & T Clark, 2007, pp. 113 – 56.

Eromosele, Femi. “Sex and Sexuality in the Works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie”. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 2013, Vol 5, No 9, 99-110.

Ezeigbo, Akachi. *Gender Issues in Nigeria: A Feminine Perspective.* Vista, 1996.

Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution.* William Morrow, 1970.

Fonchingong, Charles. “Unbending Gender Narratives in African Literature”. *Journal of International Women’s Studies,* Vol 8, Iss 1, 2006, pp. 135-47.

Forgacs, David, Ed. *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*. New York University, 2000

Freedman, Estelle. *Feminism, Sexuality & Politics*. University of North Carolina, 2006.

Fwangyil, Gloria. "A Reformist-Feminist Approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Purple Hibiscus". *African Research Review*, Vol 5 (3), No 20, 2011, pp. 261-74.

Green-Simms, Lindsey. "The Emergent Queer: Homosexuality and Nigerian Fiction in the 21st Century". *Research in African Literatures: Queer Valences in African Literatures and Film*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2016, pp. 139-61.

Hammonds, Evelynn. "Towards a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: the Problematic of Silence". *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. Edited by Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty. Routledge, 1996, pp. 93-104

Haynes, Tonya. "No Sex Please, We’re Feminists: Sexual Silences in Caribbean Gender and Development Studies". *Caribbean Feminisms: Interventions in Scholarship, Art, and*

Activism across the Region, Iss. 16, No. 1. Ed. by Tonya Haynes and Tami Navarro. https://sfonline.barnard.edu/no-sex-please-were-feminists-sexual-silences-in-caribbean-gender-and-development-studies/. Accessed May 30, 2023.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End, 1984.

---. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Routledge, 2015

---. *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. Routledge, 2000

Hungwe, Chipo. "Putting Them in Their Place: "Respectable" and "Unrespectable" Women in Zimbabwean Gender Studies". *Feminist Africa*, Vol 6, 2006, pp. 33-47.

Karmakar, Chandrima. "The Conundrum of 'Home' in the Literature of the Indian Diaspora: An Interpretive Analysis". *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol. 64, No. 1, 2015, pp. 77-90.

King, Rosamond. *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination*. University Press of Florida, 2014.

Kolodny, Annette. "Dancing Through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice, and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism". *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1980, pp. 1-25.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. The Crossing Press, 1984.

Madunagu, Bene. "The Nigerian Feminist Movement: Lessons from "Women in Nigeria", WIN". *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 35, No. 118, 2008, pp. 666-72.

Majstorovic, Danijela & Lassen, Inger. *Living with Patriarchy: Discursive Constructions of Gendered Subjects Across Cultures*. John Benjamins, 1984.

Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics.* University of Illinois, 2000.

Mohanty, Chandra T. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Duke UP, 2003

Ngcobo, Lauretta. 1986. "African Motherhood: Myth and Reality". *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2010, pp. 533-41.

Ogundipe-Leslie, Molara. 1994. “Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context”. *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Ed. by Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson. Blackwell, 2010, pp. 542-50.

Ojo-Ade, Femi. “Still a Victim? Mariama Ba’s Une si Longue Lettre”. *African Literature Today,* 12, 1982, pp. 71-87.

…. “Female Writers, Male Critics”. *African Literature Today,* 13, 1983, pp. 158-79.

Omonubi-McDonnell, Morolake. *Gender Inequality in Nigeria.* Spectrum, 2003.

Quayson, Ato. *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka and Ben Okri*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997.

Root, Deborah. *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, & the Commodification of Difference*. Routledge, 1996.

Samanga, Rufaro. 2018. "A Controversy Followed Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to Abantu Book Fest – How Did it Turn Out?" https://www.okayafrica.com/a-controversy-followed-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-to-abantu-book-fest/. Accessed on May 15, 2023.

Spivak, Gayatri. “Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271-313.

Udenta, Udenta. *Revolutionary Aesthetics and the African Literary Process*. Fourth Dimension, 1993.

Uko, Iniobong. “Transcending the Margins: New Directions in Women’s Writing”. *African Literature Today,* 25, 2006, pp. 82-93.

Vignal, Daniel. "L'homophilie dans le roman negro-africain d'expression anglaise et francaise." Peuples Noirs, Peuples Africains, 33, pp. 63-81.

Wang, Esme. “Akwaeke Emezi and Esmé Weijun Wang discuss 'The Death of Vivek Oji'”. *Virtual Author Programs*. YouTube, uploaded by Seattle Public Library, 30 September, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWEYBeWNikY.

Wolf, Naomi. *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*. Harper Collins, 2002

Wood, Julia. 1994. "Gendered Media: The Influence of Media on Views of Gender". http://www.nyu.edu/classes/jackson/causes.of.gender.inequality/ Accessed December 8, 2022.

Yarhouse, Mark. *Understanding Gender Dysphoria: Navigating Transgender Issues in a Changing Culture*. InterVarsity, 2015