

Review Article

Female Ordeal and Matrimonial Bondage: An Echography of Selected Novels by Some Female African Writers

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Abstract: This paper examines female predicaments and matrimonial challenges in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The paper further argues that these novels expose the painful experiences of African women within marriage, motherhood, patriarchy and religious or cultural expectations. In addition, this paper focuses on how marriage, which is often presented as a source of dignity and social fulfillment, becomes a space of suffering, silence, sacrifice and emotional imprisonment. From a Feminist theoretical perspective, the analyses in this paper reveals that marriage is projected in these novels both as a cultural institution and a site for female oppression. However, the women are not presented only as victims but they also demonstrate endurance, resistance and the desire for self-definition. The paper concludes that Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, and Adichie use fiction to challenge patriarchal structures and call for women's dignity, voice and freedom within African societies.

Keywords: Marriage, Bondage, Matrimony, Patriarchy and Culture.

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INTRODUCTION

African literature often presents marriage not only as a union between two people but also as a social institution shaped by culture, tradition, religion, patriarchy, and economic pressure. In many African novels, women's experiences within marriage reveal suffering, oppression, silence, sacrifice, and resistance. African women writers often expose the suffering of women within patriarchal societies. In many African communities, marriage is presented as a woman's greatest achievement. However, in the selected novels under study, marriage does not always bring peace, love, or fulfilment. Instead, it becomes a space for oppression, silence, sacrifice, betrayal, and emotional imprisonment. Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, Flora Nwapa and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie show that women's ordeals are not accidental. They are created by cultural traditions, male domination, religious pressure, economic dependence, and social expectations. Through Nnu Ego, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, and Beatrice, these writers reveal how women suffer in marriage and how some of them struggle to regain their dignity. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta presents Nnu Ego as a woman trapped by the traditional belief that a woman's worth depends on marriage and childbearing. Her life of sacrifice reveals the cruelty of a society that celebrates

motherhood while neglecting the mother. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Bâ explores polygamy, betrayal, and female resilience through Ramatoulaye's reflective letters, while Aissatou's decision to leave her marriage represents female self-assertion. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie portrays Beatrice's matrimonial bondage under Eugene's religious fanaticism, domestic violence, and authoritarian control. Nwapa on her part through *Efuru* projects a society where marriage becomes a form of imprisonment because of *Efuru's* inability to bear children.

The phrase "Female ordeal" is used in this paper to refer to the suffering, hardship, and emotional pain experienced by women. This may include domestic violence, forced marriage, childlessness, polygamy, emotional neglect, sexual exploitation, poverty, widowhood, and social humiliation. "Matrimonial bondage" on the other hand refers to a situation where marriage becomes a form of imprisonment rather than companionship or a condition where marriage limits a woman's freedom. The woman becomes trapped by cultural expectations, fear of shame, economic dependence, family pressure, or religious beliefs that force her to remain in an unhappy or abusive marriage. Instead of being a space of love, respect and mutual

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support, marriage may become a place where women are controlled, exploited, abused, or denied freedom. "Echography" should be understood in this paper as a deep examination or "scanning" of the realities hidden inside marriage in African fiction. Just as medical echography reveals what is inside the body, literary echography reveals the hidden pain, silence, and struggles of women in marriage. Just like in many African novels, Buchi Emecheta, Mriama Bâ, Flora Nwapa and Chimamanda Adichie project the marriage institution in their novels as a bondage that oppresses, exploits and marginalizes the African woman.

Female Predicaments in the African Marriage Institution

Most African female writer's novels often explore colonial history, tradition, gender roles, leadership, family life, religion, poverty, and social change. Marriage is highly valued in many African societies because it is often seen as a source of respect, family continuity, social identity, and cultural fulfillment. A woman is sometimes judged by her ability to marry, bear children, and maintain her home. However, African novels show that marriage can also become oppressive when society places all the burden of patience, sacrifice, and endurance on the woman. A woman may be expected to remain loyal even when she is abused, betrayed, abandoned, or silenced. In this sense, marriage becomes less of a partnership and more of a system of control. The marriage institution in Africa is greatly affected and controlled by patriarchy. Patriarchy is a social system in which men hold power and women are expected to obey. In many African novels, patriarchy gives men authority over women's bodies, choices, movement and voice. Barbara Christian in "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*" argues that the term "patriarchy" technically means 'rule of fathers', but in its current practical usage it more often refers to any system of male superiority and female inferiority. Patriarchal kinship is the core of what is meant by patriarchy: the idea that paternity is the central social relationship" (2) It is this patriarchal stereotype that has turned most African marriages into bondage and this is amongst the many ills that female African writers set out to criticize.

To begin with, N Banyiwia-Horne in "African Womanhood: The Contrasting Perspectives of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*" argues that the question of African womanhood, though not given much consideration in critical evaluations of African literature until recent years, is one of the subjects that often finds its way into the writings of both male and female authors from the continent. Images of African womanhood abound in the literature, with some male authors giving as much exposure to the subject as female ones. In fact, some of the most fascinating and exotic women in fiction have been created by male writers. Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* in the novel by that name

and Wole Soyinka's Simi in *The Interpreters* readily come to mind. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta presents the suffering of Nnu Ego, a woman whose identity is tied to marriage and motherhood. In her society, a woman is respected mainly when she is married and able to bear children, especially sons. Nnu Ego's first ordeal is infertility in her first marriage. Because she cannot immediately produce children, she is treated as incomplete and useless. This shows how society reduces a woman's value to her womb. When she later becomes a mother, her suffering does not end. She struggles with poverty, hunger, and the heavy responsibility of raising children almost alone. Her husband, Nnaife, is weak, irresponsible, and unable to provide proper support. Yet Nnu Ego is still expected to remain faithful, patient, and self-sacrificing. The title of the novel is ironic. Motherhood is supposed to bring joy, but for Nnu Ego, it brings pain, poverty, loneliness, and disappointment. Her children, for whom she sacrifices everything, eventually abandon her emotionally. Marriage in the novel becomes a form of bondage because Nnu Ego has little control over her life. She is transferred from one husband to another and judged by her ability to produce children. Her desires, emotions, and personal happiness are ignored. She is bound by tradition, by poverty, and by her role as wife and mother. Even when Nnaife fails as a husband, society does not free Nnu Ego from her responsibilities. She must continue to serve, endure, and suffer. Emecheta therefore questions the traditional belief that motherhood is always a woman's greatest reward.

Also, forced marriage is one major form of female ordeal in Emecheta's novel. In some African novels, young girls are given out in marriage without their consent. Their personal dreams, education, and emotions are ignored. Forced marriage shows how women's bodies and futures can be controlled by family and tradition. The girl becomes an object of exchange rather than a human being with personal desires. This idea of force marriages has been projected as a major predicament of the institution of marriage especially in the societies projected in the novels under study. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Buchi Emecheta presents the struggles of Nnu Ego, whose identity is strongly tied to marriage and motherhood. The novel shows how society praises motherhood but often leaves women emotionally and economically exhausted. Nnu Ego sacrifices herself for her husband and children, yet her life remains full of suffering. The novel questions the idea that marriage and motherhood automatically bring joy to women. In the lines below, the narrators buttress our arguments that women in the universe of Emecheta's novel were forced into a marriage without their consent:

One evening Nnaife called Kehinde and asked her what she thought of a certain young man who, though he had not gone to college like Taiwo's prospective husband, had a good job at the railway. He was not prepared for the answer he got. "I am not marrying that

man."...Nnaife laughed coarsely. He was amused and at the same time relieved. His daughter, he told himself, was still very young. "You don't have to like your husband," he assured her. "You don't even have to know him in advance. You just marry him. You are lucky you already know this one, and that you know what job he is in. Things have changed. Before, you might not have known him at all. (204)

The declarations above by Nnaife to his daughter Kehinde shows the extent to which culture and patriarchal structures dehumanized the Ibo woman. Kehinde is not even supposed to know the man she is to get marry to because the decision as to who she is supposed to get marry to is solely the responsibility of her father as tradition prescribes. Through Nnu Ego, Kehinde and other female characters in the novel, Emecheta shows that traditional marriage can imprison women when it denies them the freedom to make their choices, economic independence, emotional fulfilment, and personal identity.

Besides forced marriages, domestic violence has equally been projected as an ordeal to African marriages because domestic violence is another serious form of matrimonial bondage. Some husbands use physical force, insults, threats and intimidation to control their wives. The wife suffers silently because society often tells her to endure for the sake of marriage, children, or family honour. In many African novels, domestic violence is not presented as a private matter only. It is shown as a social problem supported by silence, fear, and patriarchal power. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie presents female suffering mainly through Beatrice Achike, also known as Mama. Beatrice is married to Eugene, a wealthy and respected Catholic Christian. Outside the home, Eugene appears generous, religious, and admirable. Inside the home, he is violent, controlling, and abusive. Beatrice suffers physical and emotional violence in her marriage. Eugene beats her severely, causing her miscarriages and deep psychological trauma. Yet she remains silent for a long time because of religious fear, social pressure, and economic dependence. Her suffering shows how domestic violence can be hidden behind respectability, wealth, and religious devotion. Adichie criticizes a society that praises powerful men publicly while ignoring the suffering of women inside the home. Though Eugene is respected outside the home, he terrorizes his wife and children inside the family space. The novel exposes how religion, patriarchy, and social respectability can hide domestic violence. Beatrice's silence represents the pain of many women trapped in abusive homes. The lines below highlights the theme of domestic violence which is suffered not only by Beatrice but her children as well in the hands of their father. According to the narrator:

Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not go to communion and Papa flung his

heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the etagere. It landed on Jaja's shoulder. Which mama polish often. It cracked the top shelf, swept, the beige. The Thud was loud, the sound of something breaking, Jaja fell to the floor". Then mama came in, she stared at the figurine pieces on the floor and then knelt and started to pick them up with her bare hands. (33)

The above illustrates how religion as practice by Kambili and the sacred text itself becomes a weapon of terror. In this household, faith and fear merge so completely that religious devotion becomes indistinguishable from subjugation. Eugene can be considered in the novel as a symbol of domestic violence which is partly precipitated by his religious conviction. One is therefore not surprised when C. Stobie in "Dethroning The Infallible Father: Religion, Patriarchy and Politics In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" argues that Adichie in her novel highlights the devastating effects of patriarchal control and intolerance within the family, the Roman Catholic Church, education and the State. Her impulse is reformist, and she offers alternatives to absolutism by endorsing respect, tolerance, forgiveness and hybridity. Stobie concludes that Adichie promotes a progressive view of religion, spirituality, culture and gender roles while countering the presentation of the 'infallible' father in various guises.

Capo, Zanou and Gbaguidi in their analyses of Adichie's novel argue that like the majority of women's fiction, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* has often been analysed in a feminist perspective whereby men are portrayed as perpetrators of violence against women, and women as victims, and strong women generally, as prostitutes. They quote Kivai, who in his analysis of the root causes of female marginalization and subjugation in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, identifies domestic violence, religion, traditions, family life, desire for sons and colonialism as being responsible for unequal gender relations, which serves as the basis of women's exploitation. In addition, the authors posit that Adichie is engaged to work with women, and through her writings, she gives them the means to empower themselves and the opportunity to achieve their highest potential. To the authors therefore, Adichie in her novels intend to remove the stereotypical portraiture of women and move towards stronger representation of women characters not only taking active and shared roles with men, but also taking responsibility for their own destinies. To achieve her vision, the authors conclude, she is convinced that, for lasting change to occur, it has to start from the family, a place where men usually assert their power over the women and get them fall submissive. Capo, Zanou and Gbaguidi principally examine gender relations in Adichie's novel and the role of the environment and society in the subjugation of women.

In summary therefore, Beatrice's marriage is a clear example of matrimonial bondage. She lives in a

beautiful house, but the house is like a prison. Eugene controls what his wife and children say, eat, wear, and believe. His authority is absolute. Beatrice cannot freely express herself. She is trapped by fear, Catholic guilt, and the social image of her husband as a good man. Her silence represents the silence of many abused women who suffer privately because society protects male authority. Eventually, Beatrice poisons Eugene. This act is not presented as simple wickedness; rather, it is the desperate reaction of a woman who has been pushed beyond endurance. Through Beatrice, Adichie shows the dangerous consequences of prolonged oppression.

Furthermore, polygamy also appears in many African novels as a source of female suffering. While polygamy may be culturally accepted in some communities, literature often shows its emotional consequences on women. A woman in a polygamous home may suffer jealousy, neglect, competition, humiliation, and insecurity. The husband may enjoy authority, while the wives are left to struggle for attention, resources, and dignity. In *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Bâ explores polygamy, betrayal, and female endurance. In the novel female ordeal is presented not only through Ramatoulaye but also through Aissatou. The novel exposes the emotional pain caused by polygamy, betrayal, and patriarchal customs. Ramatoulaye suffers deeply when her husband, Modou, abandons her and marries a much younger woman, Binetou. This betrayal is painful because Ramatoulaye has spent many years as a loyal wife and mother. Modou's second marriage humiliates her and reduces her emotional worth. Aissatou also suffers when her husband, Mawdo, takes a second wife because of family pressure and caste expectations. However, unlike Ramatoulaye, Aissatou refuses to remain in an oppressive marriage. She leaves Mawdo, educates herself, and becomes economically independent. Mariama Bâ therefore presents two different female responses to matrimonial suffering: endurance and resistance.

In the novel for example, Mariama Bâ shows how polygamy can wound a woman emotionally and reduce her dignity as it destroys trust and brings pain to the women. In the lines below, Ramatoulaye paints a very pathetic picture of the plight of the Muslim woman especially after losing her husband. As she says:

While the men, in along, irregular file of official and private cars, public buses, Lorries and mopeds, accompany Modou to his last rest (people were for a long time to talk of the crowd which followed the funeral procession), our sisters-in-law undo our hair. My co-wife and I are put inside a rough and ready tent made of a wrapper pulled taut above our heads and set up for the occasion. While our sisters-in-law are constructing it, the women present, informed of the work in hand, get up and throw some coins on to the fluttering canopy so as to ward off evil spirits. (5)

Widowhood practice is projected as a form of female ordeal in Mariama Ba's novel. In the novel, widows are subjected to humiliating rituals, accusations, property seizure, and social isolation. Instead of being comforted after losing their husbands, they are often treated with suspicion and cruelty. This reveals how tradition can sometimes be used to punish women rather than protect them. Fairly on in the novel, Ramatoulaye further expatiates on the fact that widowhood doesn't only inflict pain on the woman but polygamy dehumanizes and dispossess her completely physically and emotionally.

According to Her:

This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and, worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behaviour is conditioned: no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful or inhospitable. (5)

The lines above justify our claims that polygamy is one of the major ordeals that African women have to deal with. As Ramatoulaye says in the lines above, polygamy transforms a woman into "a thing in the service of the man who has married her" (5) because she is deprived and dispossessed of her personality and dignity as she becomes an instrument in the hands of her husband. When her husband secretly marries her best friend, Ramatoulaye remains in the marriage because she wants to keep her family together but her husband abandons her and their twelve children. Nevertheless, despite her dispossession, Ramatoulaye's voice in the later part of the novel also shows female strength. Through writing, reflection and friendship, she resists silence and reasserts her womanhood. In addition, marriage becomes bondage in the novel because women are expected to accept polygamy even when it destroys them emotionally. Society gives men the power to take additional wives, while women are expected to remain silent and dignified. Ramatoulaye is trapped by religion, motherhood, social expectations, and emotional attachment to her husband. She does not easily leave the marriage because society has trained women to endure suffering for the sake of family honour. Aissatou, however, breaks the bondage as her decision to leave Mawdo shows female resistance and self-recovery. Through Aissatou, Bâ suggests that education and economic independence are important tools for women's liberation. It is worth noting that religion also contributes to matrimonial bondage, especially in *So Long a Letter* and *Purple Hibiscus*. In *So Long a Letter*, Islamic marriage customs are used to defend polygamy. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene uses Catholicism to justify control, punishment, and violence. The problem is not

religion itself, but the misuse of religion by men to dominate women. The novels show that when religion is mixed with patriarchy, it can become a weapon of oppression.

Similarly, just as in Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter*, Buchi Emecheta in *The Joy of Motherhood* equally shows how polygamous the Ibo society is and the effects of polygamy on the Ibo woman. Nnaife is forced to live with her co-wives and their children because that is what tradition and culture demands and she is obliged to carry the burden not only of her children but that of her husband's co-wives as well. The conversation below between Nnaife and his wife Nnu Ego once again expatiates on the burden that polygamy imposes on the Ibo woman:

Oh, Nnaife, how are you going to cope? All those children and all those wives." Here she stopped, as the truth hit her like a heavy blow. She almost staggered as it sank in. Nnaife's brother, the very man who had negotiated for her, had three wives even when she was still at home in Ibuza. Surely, people would not expect Nnaife to inherit them? ... Seeing that her friends were in suspense, Nnu Ego went on to explain: "His brother has died and left behind several wives and God knows how many children." "Oh, dear, are you bound to accept them all?" asked Mama Abby, who knew little of Ibo custom. "You have your own children to think of surely people know that Nnaife is not in a steady job?" (115-116).

The lines above only show how little Mama Abby knows about the Ibo culture and tradition and re-enforces our argument that polygamy is a serious ordeal not only to the Ibo woman but to the African women as a whole. Polygamy and its resultant consequences is therefore amongst the many ills that Emecheta's novel sets out to satirize.

Moreover, though from a slightly different perspective, Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* also highlights the effects of polygamy on the African woman and unlike Emecheta and Mariama Ba, polygamy in *Efuru* is linked to childlessness. Once a married woman cannot bear children, especially male children, it becomes a genuine reason for the man to marry another wife or wives. The conversation between Eneberi and Efuru below once again projects the Ibo society as a polygamous one where marriage is linked to child bearing:

I am thinking of getting a wife for you. Why? Gilbert asked surprised. You know why. This is the fourth year of our marriage and I have not had an issue for you. We have lived happily these four years. And I am worried. If we get another wife, a young girl, she will have children for you and I will love the children because they are your own children. (174)

Efuru encourages her husband to get another wife who will enable her bear children for her husband. In the later part of the novel, Efuru's mother equally advises her daughter to inform the husband to get another wife who will bear children for them. As she says:

Efuru, she said at last, it is about you and your husband. Don't you think you will begin now to look for a young girl for him? It will be better if you suggest this to your husband. He will at least know that you want him to marry another wife and have children. (164)

The conversations above justify our claims that polygamy is a common cultural practice in the Ibo society and that it subjects a woman to physical and emotional torture as a woman is expected to cater and carry the burden of children that are not even hers. Polygamy as seen in the novel affects both the first wife, the second and even the children. It causes deep grief and betrayal for the first wife as it erases her years of hard work and loyalty and for the second wife, who in most cases is of under age, polygamy traps her and treats her like property used by her parents to get wealth. For the children, polygamy cuts off support for the older children as attention is shifted to the new and younger families. Mariama Ba's novel therefore sets out to show that polygamy no longer fits in the modern society as it benefits men and dehumanizes the woman.

More still, besides polygamy, childlessness is another painful ordeal for many female characters in most African fiction especially as exemplified by some of the authors under study. In some societies, a woman's value is tied to motherhood. If she cannot have children, she may be blamed, mocked, rejected, or replaced by another woman. The painful irony is that infertility may not be the woman's fault but society often blames her alone. This shows the unfairness of gender expectations in marriage. The society is conditioned by patriarchal norms where childlessness becomes the problem of the woman and not that of the man. In *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa presents a female character who suffers because of failed marriages and childlessness. Efuru is hardworking, generous, and independent, but society still judges her because her marital life does not fit traditional expectations. As a result of their childlessness, Efuru and her husband are mocked and provoked by a group of women while returning from the stream. The conversation amongst the women highlight a lot of issues relating to childlessness in relation to the Ibo society and it deserves quoting here at some length:

I like them, one woman said as Gilbert and Efuru leaving the stream...When two people live like that, then the world is worth living in, another added. What do you admire in the lives of those two? Omirima asked contemptuously. Do you know what they went through last night? Don't be carried away by the fact that they come to the stream together and swim and play in the deep. You are right, one of the women said. Have

they children? Another asked? Children? You don't pluck children from a tree you know. You don't fight for them either. Money cannot buy them. Happiness cannot give you children. Children indeed, they have no children. Your daughter-in-law is good, but she is childless. She is beautiful but we cannot eat beauty. She is wealthy but riches cannot go on errands for us. (163-174)

The lines above emphasizes the importance of children in an African marriage and once a woman cannot bear children, her marriage is at stake and she becomes an instrument of mockery and ridicule. Efuru's parents are advised to get a new wife for their son simple because she cannot bear children" I mean that your son should marry another girl who will bear children for us. I mean that Efuru is barren and therefore cannot reproduce". (182). The novel therefore challenges the idea that a woman's worth depends only on marriage and children. The novels also reveal that many women remain trapped in oppressive marriages because they lack financial independence. Without education, employment, or property rights, they may be unable to leave abusive homes. The novels under study therefore show that economic dependence strengthens matrimonial bondage as a woman who cannot support herself may be forced to endure humiliation in order to survive.

It is worth mentioning that matrimonial bondage is not always physical. It can also be emotional, psychological, cultural, and economic. A woman may be free to move around physically but still be imprisoned by fear, shame, tradition, poverty, or religious pressure. Society may tell her that a "good woman" must endure everything in marriage. This expectation makes her suffering invisible. The three novels under study also show that culture and religion play a major role in women's suffering. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, tradition teaches that a woman's value depends on children. In *So Long a Letter*, culture and religion are used to justify polygamy. In *Purple Hibiscus*, patriarchal family values support Eugene's control over his wife and children. The authors do not reject African culture completely. Rather, they criticize harmful cultural practices that deny women dignity and freedom.

From the analyses of the novels under study, it is established that the suffering of women in marriage is caused by several factors which includes patriarchal structures that give men excessive power over women, economic dependence makes women unable to leave oppressive marriages, social stigma makes divorced or unmarried women feel ashamed and religious misinterpretation encouraged women to endure abuse silently. In addition, family pressure forces women to remain in unhappy marriages while traditional customs sometimes deny women freedom and inheritance rights. Finally, the lack of education limits women's awareness and opportunities. The four novels show that women

suffer because marriage is controlled by patriarchal values. Nnu Ego, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Efuru and Beatrice are all affected by male dominance and social expectations. In the novels, women are expected to endure suffering quietly. Society praises the patient wife and condemns the woman who resists. Marriage becomes a duty rather than a relationship based on love, respect, and equality. The novelists also stress that motherhood increases women's burden. Nnu Ego sacrifices everything for her children. Ramatoulaye remains strong for her children after Modou's betrayal. Beatrice endures abuse partly because of her family and children and Efuru is bound to succumb to whatever the husband does because of her childlessness.

Resistance and Redefining Female Identity in the Novels of Adichie, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwopa and Emecheta

African novels do not only show women as victims. They also show women resisting oppression in different ways. Some women resist by speaking out. Others resist by educating themselves, leaving abusive marriages, supporting other women, writing letters, working hard, or refusing to accept unfair traditions. Salome C. Nnoromele in "Representing the African Woman: Subjectivity and Self in *The Joys of Motherhood*" for example questions the rapid generalizations, and patent untruths" that have clouded the personality and the inner reality of African women and called on African women to speak for themselves (132). To her, she finds it troubling that "even as African women are beginning to speak for themselves and to write about their lives, the popular misconception of African women as slaves, brutalized and abused by a patriarchal society, still overwhelmingly defines Western critical attitudes" (3). The novelists under study set out to challenge this generalized Western stereotype by projecting women who are not mere victims of patriarchal and cultural structures but ready to make their voices heard by resisting and challenging male dominance. For example, Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* resists through writing and self-reflection. Efuru resists by maintaining her dignity and independence. Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* eventually takes action against the violence in her home and Efuru in *Efuru* denounces her marriage and empowers herself economically through her relationship with the lake goddess. All these show that African women in literature are not passive because even when they suffer, they search for survival, identity, and freedom. The theme of female ordeal and matrimonial bondage exposes the hidden suffering of women in African societies and also questions traditions that protect male power while silencing women. Through this theme, African novelists call for justice, respect, gender equality, and humane marriage. They suggest that marriage should not be a prison but should be based on love, mutual respect, responsibility and partnership. The theme also helps readers understand that women's struggles are not

merely private problems because they are connected to larger social, cultural, economic, and political structures.

To begin with, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* presents Beatrice also referred to in the novel as Mama who from the beginning of the novel is projected as a passive, submissive and ready to accommodate all forms of oppression from her husband. She undergoes, physical and emotional violence but is obliged to endure for the sake of her children. When the oppression becomes unbearable and she realizes that she cannot physically confront Eugene who is revealed in the novel as a tyrant, she designs a plot to eliminate her husband as a desperate way of liberating herself from his tyranny and domination. Beatrice resort to poison as a means towards liberation herself from physical and psychological torture. When Beatrice receives a phone call from her husband's factory that he has collapsed and died, she isn't very worried as the children because that has been her ultimate plan. The conversation below between Kambili and Mama testifies to the fact that Papa died of poison:

They called me from the factory, they found him dead lying on his desk... "They did an autopsy" she said, they have found the poison in your father's body. Mama tightened her wrapper, then went to the windows; she push the drapes aside, checking that the louvers were shut to keep the rain from splashing into the house...her movements were calm and slow...I started putting poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor... But why his tea? But mama did not answer; not even when I stood up and shook her until Jaja yanked me...I had never considered the possibility that Papa would die, that papa could die. He was different from Ade Coker, from all the other people they had killed. He had seem immortal. (295)

The passage above show clearly that Papa was poisoned by his wife as a desperate measure to liberate herself from Eugene's oppression, torture and tyranny. Poison therefore becomes one of the means used by African women to liberate themselves from the physical and emotional trauma imposed by the institution of marriage. When Beatrice becomes helpless in her oppressive and toxic marriage, she decides to use poison to get rid of her husband and free herself from all forms of patriarchal torture and domination. Poisoning can be considered as a form of extreme resistance and a means towards reasserting her womanhood and redefining her identity because it is only in the absence of Eugene that she can now take her own decisions, make her own choices and decide her own actions.

Furthermore, in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Efuru denounces her husband and decides to worship the lake goddess as a sign of resistance and as a means towards achieving happiness, wealth and beauty. As the narrator says:

All night she thought. She was sleeping alone in her bed. It was an Orie night, and she was in white. She had to keep Orie days holy for the woman of the lake whom she worshipped. She was therefore forbidden to sleep with her husband. As she lay awake that night, she thought of Uhamiri. Perhaps she will visit me this night. Perhaps I shall dream one of those sweet dreams about her. She will show me her riches, trinkets, ornaments and big fishes she used for her firewood. (165)

It is noticeable in the except above that the worship of the lake goddess is giving Efuru the pleasure which her husband couldn't give her. Fairly on in the novel, the narrator once again highlights the pleasure and satisfaction that Efuru's psychological relationship with the lake goddess is giving her. Though the relationship is established in a dream experience, it nevertheless gives Efuru the physical, emotional and psychological satisfaction which she has been yearning for but couldn't get from her husband. According to Efuru:

I dream several nights of the lake and the woman of the lake. Two nights ago, the dream was very vivid. I was swimming in the lake, when a fish raised its head and asked me to follow it. Foolishly I swam out to follow it. It dived and I dived too. I got to the bottom of the lake and to my surprise, I saw an elegant woman, very beautiful, combing her long black hair with a golden comb. When she saw me, she stopped combing her hair and smiled at me and asked me to come in. 'I went in. She offered me kola, I refused to take, and she laughed and did not persuade me. She beckoned to me to follow her. I followed her like a woman possessed. We went to the place she called her kitchen. She used different kinds of fish as fire wood, big fish like as a Echim, Aja and Efuru. Then she showed me all her riches. As I was about to leave her house under the water, I got up from my sleep. ...I told my husband. He could not understand the dream. So he asked me to come and tell you. What I have noticed so far each time I dreamt about the woman of the lake was that in the mornings when I went to the market I sold all the things I took to the market. Debtors came of their own accord to pay their debts...The old man laughed softly. 'Your dream is good. The woman of the lake, our Unhamiri, has chosen you to be one of her worshippers. (146-147)

From the evidence above, one realizes that the worship of the lake goddess therefore becomes a form of resistance and a means towards acquiring financial independence. Efuru is expected to become financially independent as a result of her worshipping of the lake goddess. The lines below outline the benefits Efuru will gain as a result of worshipping the lake goddess:

You are a great woman. Nwashike Ogene, your daughter is a great woman. The goddess of the lake has chosen her to be one of her worshippers. It is a great honour. She is going to protect you and shower riches on you. But you must keep her laws. Look round this town,

nearly all the story buildings you find are built by women who one time or another have been worshippers of Uhamiri (153)

The worship of the lake goddess therefore as seen in the lines above becomes a means through which Efuru gains financial independence. Financial independence is important in African marriages because the lack of financial independence is what has pushed many African women to remain trapped in toxic marriages. O.C Anidi in "Women Empowerment for Sustainable National Development in Nigeria: Lessons From Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*" examines the roles played by the female characters in Flora Nwapa's novel, *Efuru*, and argues that the novel advocates for the empowerment of women for sustainable national development in Nigeria. Her paper further posits that women, as depicted in *Efuru*, play highly significant roles in their families and communities, as workers, wives, mothers and teachers of (cultural) values and for them to effectively achieve these goals, they must be financially stable.

IG Musa and SA Sharon in "Cultural Intersectionality in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*" in their analyses of *Efuru* feel that patriarchal stereotypes have long been entrenched in literary and cultural narratives, often relegating women to subordinate roles defined by societal expectations. These stereotypes not only reflect but also reinforce male-dominated structures, shaping perceptions of gender roles in various cultural contexts. The paper examines how Nwapa dismantles patriarchal stereotypes in *Efuru*, offering a nuanced portrayal of African womanhood that transcends traditional narratives. They conclude that women are independent because of the way they perceive things and do not wait for a man to be significant. They are illustrated as hard workers who are financially independent, adding something to their defiance of patriarchy. In a more radical manner, Efuru finally decides to leave her marriage as a means towards emancipating herself and reasserting her womanhood. She sees her marriage as a bondage and to liberate herself from the bondage, she has to denounce her marriage. The conversation below between Efuru and doctor establishes the fact that she has left not only her husband but her marriage and is bent never to go back even when the doctor tries to convince her:

Come on, Efuru, tell me. Can you hide anything from me after so many years? The doctor pleaded. I have left Eneberi. You have left Eneberi. Why? Efuru said nothing. Tell me, why did you leave your husband? Did he beat you? Efuru shook her head like a child. Why then did you leave him? The doctor insisted. I think you should consider going back to your husband. Difu, it is not possible. (221)

Leaving her marriage can thus be considered as a means through which women outrightly reject patriarchy and reassert their female identities. In the

novel therefore, Flora Nwapa presents women not only as victims of cultural norms and gender biases but equally as non-conformists who are ready to confront, nullify and dissociate themselves from all forms of male dominance.

Similarly, just as in *Efuru*, Adaku in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood* resists male dominance by empowering herself economically:

...Yes, I can see you have been busy making money. Look at all your wares, look at your stores. I'm sure Nnaife's money went into building your trade. Adaku was now very rich. She had only two daughters to feed; she talked of sending them to private lessons to learn their alphabet though she had not actually done so yet, nor were they attending any school. Adaku's store in Zabo market was stacked high with beans, pepper, dried fish, Egusi and spicy foodstuffs. (162)

As a result of her financial independence, Adaku can now decide to send her kids for private lessons and this shows that financial independence gives the woman the right to make her own choices especially when it comes to the education of her kids. Fairly on in the novel, the narrator once again makes us understand that Adaku's business is expanding on a large scale. According to the narrator:

The last time she had seen her at her market store, she had once more pleaded with her, though even as she did she knew it was a hopeless venture. On that very day Adaku was living up to the meaning of her name: "the daughter of wealth". She told Nnu Ego that she was giving up selling beans and peppers, she was buying a larger store on which she would have Abada material for Lappas. She smiled to see the wonder and surprise on Nnu Ego's face. She would have passed on her former stall to Nnu Ego, she said, but she was leasing it to someone who would pay her yearly. "That will take care of my rent, at least," she finished, laughing. (170-171)

Most African women especially in royal communities depend solely on their men for economic survival and this makes it impossible for them to make personal choices. Adaku's social status in society rises because she empowers herself financially and this enables her to take decision without consulting anyone. Adaku therefore can be said to resist male dominance or matrimonial bondage by empowering herself financially.

Moreover, just like Efuru in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Kehinde in Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood* decides to run away from a toxic arranged marriage as a form of female resistance. She revolts against her father's patriarchal instructions and escapes to her lover's place. She tells her husband's senior wives that "I'm leaving this stuffy room tomorrow senior wife" (168). When

Kehinde's boyfriend is accused by her father of haven't adopted her, she openly says the decision to run away from her husband's house was a personal decision. As the narrator says:

Kehinde came out from the knot of people standing in the shadows watching the whole proceedings. She was crying gently and begging the policemen to please let her father go. And did the Yoruba family abduct you? ... No, no, Kehinde answered slowly. "I ran to them. And I am going to marry Aremu the butcher's son. (211)

Outright rejection and running away becomes a means through which Kehinde decides to revolt and resist against matrimonial bondage. Furthermore, education is presented as a path to female liberation, especially in *So Long a Letter*. Aissatou is able to leave Mawdo because she educates herself and becomes economically independent. When the husband takes a second wife due to family pressure, she gets a divorce and becomes independent. Her freedom contrasts with women who remain trapped because they depend on men for survival. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego's lack of economic power worsens her suffering. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice's dependence and fear keep her silent for many years. The writers suggest that women need education, financial independence, and self-awareness to resist oppressive marriages.

CONCLUSION

Female ordeal and matrimonial bondage are central concerns in many African novels. Through characters who suffer forced marriage, domestic violence, polygamy, childlessness, economic dependence, and social humiliation, African writers expose the painful realities of women's lives. However, these novels also show women's courage, endurance, and resistance. They challenge oppressive traditions and call for a more just society where women are respected as full human beings. Therefore, an echography of African novels reveals that marriage, when controlled by patriarchy and inequality, can become a form of bondage. But literature also becomes a powerful voice through which women's pain is exposed and their dignity restored. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, *So Long a Letter*, *Efuru* and *Purple Hibiscus*, marriage is not always a place of love and protection. It often becomes a place of suffering, silence, and bondage. Through Nnu Ego, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Efuru and Beatrice, the writers expose the painful realities of women living under patriarchal control. However, the novels also show different forms of female strength. Some women endure, some reflect, some walk away, and some react violently after prolonged oppression. Together, the texts call for a redefinition of marriage as a relationship based on respect, equality, love, and mutual responsibility.

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