Gender And Conflict In African Women’s Writing:
A Comparative Study of Feminist Themes in a Selection of Narratives in English
and French by Women Writers from sub-Saharan Africa

A Thesis
Presented to the Departments of French Studies and English
The University of Western Australia

In Fulfilment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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B.A. (Hons)
2001
ABSTRACT

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This is a study of both anglophone and francophone African women’s writing. It
focuses on numerous novels, many of which are relatively unknown and most of
which were published in the last twenty years, half of these in the last ten. In
considering these works I use a conceptual framework built around issues of gender
and conflict. A close textual reading of the novels covers four main thematic areas
contained within four chapters. Chapter 1 concerns texts which represent women in
conflict with their careers, their marriage and their status as mothers. Chapter 2
addresses the representation of the mother/daughter relationship, particularly in
relation to issues of education and the absent mother. Chapter 3 details the literary
exposition of excision and explores the implication of the mother’s role in this
practice. Finally, in Chapter 4 the father/daughter relationship is discussed against a
background of patriarchy and incest. Implicated in all these thematic investigations
are issues of power. Although much of the exposition of the novels concerns personal
relationships, nevertheless the authors do not omit the political dimension. The
common themes addressed by the women writers studied are further illustrated in their
development of these into motifs, their treatment of which sometimes subverts their
male counterparts’ approach. Many of the key issues developed by the writers studied
are of a taboo nature and distancing strategies are used by them in order to conform to
pressures regarding the appropriateness of their disclosures, which often results in
contrived resolutions. At the same time, market demands render such “forbidden”
topics attractive to the writers. This thesis also considers whether these texts can be
deemed feminist, and what this entails in a specifically African context.
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Acknowledgements

I have been extremely fortunate in the support and encouragement provided to me in the course of writing this thesis and I welcome the opportunity to formally express my appreciation to many people. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the support provided by The University of Western Australia where I have carried out my studies, both undergraduate and postgraduate, in the departments of English and European Languages and Studies. Equally, I would like to show my appreciation to the scholastic community, both staff and students in these departments. In particular I would like to convey my thanks to my two supervisors, Beverley Ormerod-Noakes in French Studies, and Gareth Griffiths in English for their constant support and direction over many years. It has been a great honour to work with two such inspiring scholars. Additionally, I would like to thank Wendy Waring, Rosemary Lancaster and Denis Boak who “stood in” as supervisors but who were very dedicated and from whom I also received invaluable assistance. Another scholar to whom I also owe a great many thanks is Jean-Marie Volet, who has always shown an interest in my work and who has been been generous in providing me with access to his resources. I would also like to recognise the administrative support provided by the two departments, particularly by Danielle Morris and Sue Lewis. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the financial aid provided by the UWA Travel Award and the I. and B. Jackson Scholarship, which made travel and research in Africa and Europe possible.

Finally I would like to thank both my family and friends for their continual support and patience during the period of researching and writing this thesis. In particular, I thank Sue Broomhall and Tony da Silva for their constant encouragement. Their application, enthusiasm and organisational skills in their own studies were a source of inspiration to me. Additionally, I would like to thank Toby Watkins and Paul Dunham for many stimulating conversations, as well as their support and interest. My family has always encouraged me in my decisions, this thesis being one of my major undertakings, and I thank my husband Peter and my daughters, Corinna and Naomi, for their love and patience.
INTRODUCTION

This study examines both anglophone and francophone African women’s writing. A newly developing field, it already contains an impressive body of work considering that African women have only been writing and publishing during the last few decades, anglophone women writers publishing a full decade before francophone women writers.¹ The reasons for African women’s late arrival on the literary scene have been the subject of much speculation and it is not my intention to add to this debate,² but it remains true that despite the considerable amount of work now published by these women, they have still not received the amount of critical attention devoted to their male counterparts.³ Nevertheless, in the last few years, women writers have increasingly been the focus of critical writing, particularly by other women. To choose then to write about “women” writers rather than “men” writers is in some respects an ideological choice. It acknowledges the fact that some “positive discrimination” in their favour is necessary in order to continue to rectify what is still an imbalance in the critical works available on them.

This analysis of African women writers’ texts differs from its predecessors in two major ways. Traditionally, critical works on African writing, whether concentrating on male or female writers, have focused on either anglophone or francophone writing, not on both. Only in the last few years have any book-length studies been devoted to African women’s writing and a few of the more recent have included both anglophone and francophone fiction, but the latter usually only refer to those works available in translation and which may be considered part of the African literary canon.⁴ Not only do I treat both anglophone and francophone writers but I have included as many unknown writers as possible, some of whom have received scant critical attention, or none at all, and some of whom have only very recently been published, often for the first time. In the case of the few more well-known writers I have included, such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, Buchi Emecheta, Calixthe Beyala and Aminata Sow Fall, I have, as often as possible, chosen areas of analysis which have either not already been addressed or which have received little critical commentary.
One critic who has included both anglophone and francophone writing by women is Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi whose Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference also refers to two francophone women writers not available in translation, Delphine Zanga Tsogo and Werewere Liking. In one sense my approach follows that of Nfah-Abbenyi since I agree with her that anglophone and francophone African writing “do not belong to a distinctive literary tradition because of their linguistic affiliations.” Nevertheless, I do contend that these writers’ different cultural traditions may reflect variations in their work, in content or style. Moreover, whereas Nfah-Abbenyi’s reasons for not differentiating between these two linguistic categories are primarily personal, I believe that too much emphasis on the respective writers’ colonial linguistic inheritance detracts from other more pressing issues, such as the writers’ own reasons for writing, the various approaches they take to the language they write in, and the very diverse body of work they generate.

If we take the views of the writers concerned, it seems generally true to say that they do not find it problematic to write in the language of their former colonial rulers, although they do express some qualifications to this, both in regard to aesthetics and to concerns over readership. In the first category, the Nigerian writer Buchi Emecheta, has remarked that English is not her “emotional” language, and the Senegalese author Aminata Sow Fall, has alluded to writing in French as an “obstacle.” In the second category, the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo’s remark that “[t]here is pathos in writing about people, the majority of whom will never be in a position to enjoy you or judge you. And there is some wonder in not letting that or anything else stop you from writing,” encapsulates not only the strong commitment to writing evinced by these writers, but also the concerns that their writing often lacks a local readership due to a widespread lack of literacy in most African countries, especially among women. Many of these writers, however, appear to accept, and even embrace, the necessity of writing in European languages, often citing their access to a wider readership which reflects the more optimistic side of Aidoo’s lament about the lack of a local readership. The Zimbabwean author, Yvonne Vera, is one writer who sees the positive side in writing in a colonial language for she believes that “languages are free, even when they’ve been brought to us in [...] horrific ways.” Reflecting a stance taken by many women writers, denied a voice for so long, she stresses that she is “fortunate to be writing in
any language at all,” viewing the activity of writing as “an act of celebration.” She also makes an interesting comment regarding a “target readership,” believing that, besides writing for herself, she writes for “women in Zimbabwe, women across communities” but stresses that attempts to identify a certain group of people is often miscalculated because “your audience finds you rather than you writing for an audience.”

The writers in this study principally derive from the Sub-Saharan part of Africa, excluding South Africa, but I also discuss the work of one Lebanese writer and include references to three North African writers. They originate from many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa: Senegal, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya and Zimbabwe. In considering women writers from such a broad spectrum of countries I am aware of the dangers of homogenising “the African woman writer” and, partly to counteract this assumption, I include a short bio-bibliography of all the major writers featured. The Nigerian critic and writer Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has warned against generalisation over the entire African continent in discussions about the situation of women and sees the current division into North Africa and subsaharan “black Africa” as misguided, arguing that this division is the result of “Euro-American color notions.” When referring to “African women writers” therefore, or “anglophone” or “francophone” writing, these terms are a convenient shorthand label and are not meant to suggest totalising entities.

Women writers from such a variety of countries, all of which have their own distinctive ethnic features as well as social, religious and political systems, are bound to generate a heterogeneous body of writing. These writers do share one common heritage however – colonisation, and although they do not treat this subject to the same extent as their male counterparts, nevertheless it is a constant theme in some women’s work, particularly that of the Zimbabwean writers Nozipo Maraire and Yvonne Vera. For some writers, however, such as Calixthe Beyala, born in 1961, after independence, colonisation is no longer the principal issue. These writers nearly all focus on the post-independent situation of their countries, whether it be the conditions facing women in rural Africa or, more frequently, life in the city. Another commonality among these writers is their privileged position in the level of formal education that they have received compared to
the majority of African women. Finally, the authors studied all write from their position as women, with the particular concerns that women share, namely the sentiment of living in the confining strictures of their patriarchal societies. This thesis seeks to discover how successful the female protagonists depicted are in overcoming such situations and what subversive strategies they employ in this endeavour.

How important is then the status of literature as a medium through which to comment on these concerns? Literature is seen by many as a powerful political weapon of resistance, as instanced in the many examples of African writers who are imprisoned, forced into exile and worse. In one sense, it can be viewed as a continuum of, and interaction with, non-literary modes of communication, such as the tradition of storytelling which has influenced many of the novelists, both from the point of view of wishing to tell their own stories, and also in the forms of the narratives themselves. Just as, in traditional societies, storytelling often performed a didactic purpose, contemporary women writers incorporate into their written narratives issues of pressing concern and present alternative visions. In this way literature can be viewed as helping their readers, as well as themselves, make sense of the world in which they live and hence it may be regarded as a possible source of transformation.

My own focus is principally concerned with the issues of “gender” and “conflict” and these two concepts are a continuing thread in my thesis. Ruth Bloch has provided a useful definition of gender:

As a cultural rather than purely physical fact, “gender” is meant to refer not merely to the male and the female but to the contingent and variable symbols that define masculinity and femininity within a particular social group. [...] While gender is often defined as cultural, it is not itself typically understood culturally.

Gender is generally understood to refer to the social, cultural and psychological construction of biological sexual difference and the above definition is particularly important in its reminder of the way a particular social group may define its gender relations, an issue which has been raised in connection with various African societies. As Elaine Showalter reminds us, “gender theory explores ideological inscription and the literary effects of the sex/gender system.” It is therefore inevitable that gender will assume an importance in a context where women have only recently gained
admittance to the world of writing and publication. Moreover, the women writers studied choose in general to write about women protagonists. Even when these are not necessarily the principal figures, as in Aminata Sow Fall’s novel, *L’Ex-père de la nation*, women often play a significant role, as will be discussed in chapter 4. The question of focalisation also arises, since the novels studied are often filtered through the women protagonists’ point of view; they are nearly always the central characters and the novels deal with their primarily personal concerns, such as interpersonal relationships, whether marital or intergenerational. Nevertheless I shall demonstrate how such issues are also intertwined with those of a more social and political nature.

In my consideration of gender issues there emerges a concomitant discussion of conflict, which is more often than not based on power struggles. Conflict is apparent in all the novels studied and, at its most functional level, is a useful technique to heighten dramatic interest. It may be a question of internal conflict as experienced by individual women protagonists, an issue especially relevant to the main novels studied in my first chapter, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes* and the Gabonese novelist Angèle Rawiri’s *Fureurs et cris de femmes*. Conflict may also be external, present in familial relationships, which are common to all of my chapters, in a controversial traditional practice such as that of excision, explored in chapter 3, or in intergenerational relationships, explored in chapters 2 and 4. These areas of conflict I have chosen to discuss may be viewed as contentious by some, especially taboo subjects such as excision and incest. Nevertheless, the fact that the women writers themselves have selected these issues render a study of them not only valid, but I would suggest, crucial. Both gender and conflict, then, emerge as part of my thematic discussion of several important areas of social interaction. Additionally, the conflict generated by the insistence in a patriarchal society on rigid adherence to gender demarcation also signals other important categories of difference: class, race, ethnicity and religion, issues which these writers also incorporate into their works. In exploring the various ways their female and male protagonists deal with conflict, the women writers make a profound comment on gender relations in their societies.

I have selected four principal areas of study, treated in four different chapters. Each general area includes an exploration of several key issues. My choice of author is
primarily connected with the fictional subject matter of the various novels. In concentrating on thematic concerns I do not ignore the aesthetic qualities of these novels or regard them simply as tools to assist in the search for subject matter or, in the words of Henry Louis Gates, Jnr., in relation to Black American literature, treat it “as if it were transparent.” In a literary study I believe that a consideration of literary merit is important, although I realise that the current postmodernist trend is to treat all texts as “equal” in some sense. Analysing these novels, I seek to discover the “representation” of the various issues denoted below and, with the aid of other secondary material, to draw arguments and conclusions from these, aware that in so doing the former may be subjective and the latter tenuous. At the same time, however, I do not subscribe to the view that these novels are necessarily mimetic in a narrow sense, that they are the exact image of a given reality. Instead I consider that although they are fictional constructions, they are nevertheless mimetic in a broader sense, and represent elements of social and historical reality which is always mediated by other issues, such as the individual writer’s talents and proclivities, marketing and publishing concerns, and the targeted readership. Although my focus is on African women writers, I have not totally ignored male writers, agreeing with Florence Stratton that neither female nor male writing “can be fully appreciated in isolation from the other,” and that many women writers have acknowledged the influence of their male forbears. Throughout the thesis I therefore allude to various male writers whose work is of interest to the topic I am exploring and in chapter 3, I include a brief study of the Kenyan author Ngugi’s novel *The River Between.*

My first chapter is entitled “The Modern Career Woman: A Rejection of Marriage and Motherhood?” In this chapter I consider primarily two novels, Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes* and Angèle Rawiri’s *Fureurs et cris de femmes,* both of which explore the dilemma of a female protagonist who attempts to combine a demanding career with a husband and family. I stress the aspect of the “modern” career woman since in these novels the female protagonists live in urban, nuclear families. Conflictual features in them include societal and personal issues such as ethnicity, marital rape, polygamy, extra-marital relationships, ambivalence concerning motherhood, and the extended African family. Attitudes towards gender are also explored and new strategies for subverting these are revealed. As the title of the first chapter implies, I assess the extent
to which the women depicted reject or embrace marriage and/or motherhood and their reasons for doing so. For comparative purposes I also consider briefly two Nigerian novels – Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough*, as well as Calixthe Beyala’s *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*.

In chapter 2, entitled “Mothers and Daughters,” I delineate and explore the mother/daughter relationship principally, in the anglophone field, in Nozipo Maraire’s *Zenzele: A Letter for my Daughter*, followed by shorter analyses of Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*, and Buchi Emecheta’s *Head Above Water* and *The Bride Price*. In my exploration of francophone writing I include the Senegalese novelist Ken Bugul’s autobiographical novel, *Le Baobab fou* and its sequel, *Cendres et braises* as well as Calixthe Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*. My discussion of the mother/daughter relationship is related to two main themes: the daughter’s traditional and Western education, and the “search” for an absent mother. In these novels the mother is often absent from her daughter’s life, which raises further issues of adoption and surrogate motherhood. In all cases the mothers and daughters concerned need to find ways of attempting to come to terms with what is a conflictual relationship, one indeed based on rejection in all but one novel. Not all, however, will be successful.

In chapter 3, entitled “Excision,” I discuss the literary treatment of this practice. Included in this investigation is a substantial sociological and legal discourse. Considerable controversy surrounds the subject of excision, which many African scholars consider obsesses Western feminists to the exclusion of more pressing or important subjects. The practice of excision is often defended on the grounds of culture or tradition which encompasses the wider debate over the universality of human rights versus cultural relativism. Indeed this opinion is sometimes reflected by various fictional protagonists, hence one of the chapter’s sub-titles, “An “Insider/Outsider” Discourse: Fatou Keita’s *Rebelle*.” My decision to include the subject of excision is primarily due to its relevance to the mother/daughter relationship, already explored in the previous chapter, because excision is often carried out as a direct result of the mother’s wishes. I therefore comment on the effects of this practice on the mother/daughter relationship in these novels. Additionally, the recent publication of novels directly treating the subject of excision, which had only been tangential in earlier
novels by women writers, suggests that the silence on this topic is finally being broken. Nevertheless, as another sub-heading, "Finding the Words: Flora Nwapa's Efuru" intimates, there are many problematic issues involved in describing this practice. Part of my discussion is therefore aimed at highlighting the strategies employed by these authors for dealing with this taboo subject. The novels studied in this chapter are divided into three sections, firstly anglophone novels, secondly francophone novels, and thirdly anglophone novels which are written in collaboration with Western (American) writers. In the first section are Flora Nwapa's Efuru and the Kenyan writers Muthoni Likimani's They Shall Be Chastized and Ngugi's The River Between which has many points of comparison with Likimani's novel.29 In the subsequent section Calixthe Beyala's Tu t'appelleras Tanga and, from the Ivory Coast, Fatou Keïta's Rebelle are studied.30 Finally, I explore two Somali autobiographies, Waris Dirie's Desert Flower and Aman's Aman, both collaborative projects.31 Such a collaboration raises many problematic issues. I am aware that there has been a great deal of work disputing the notion of the autobiographical relation between author and narrator, and even more so on the issue of collaborative works. Important as this line of enquiry is, due to the necessity of curtailing the scope of this thesis, I can only allude to works that incorporate such discussions, rather than investigating these issues in any detail.

My fourth and final chapter is entitled "Fathers and Daughters" and explores such relationships, always conflictual, in several texts. My discussion here is framed within two thematic investigations, that of patriarchy and that of incest. I explore the issue of patriarchy, both indigenous and Western-influenced, in relation to one anglophone and one francophone text, the Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga's Nervous Conditions and Aminata Sow Fall's L'Ex-père de la nation, together with a brief study of the Ivory Coast author Véronique Tadjo's Le Royaume aveugle.32 Incest is treated in two anglophone texts, Buchi Emecheta's The Family and Yvonne Vera's Under the Tongue and two francophone texts, the Cameroonian author Mpoudi Ngolle's Sous la cendre le feu and Marie-Gisèle Aka's Les Haillons de l'amour.33 All these father/daughter relationships are presented as arising in a patriarchal ideology based on relations of power. An exploration of such an ideology, including areas of resistance to it, is included in the discussion.
My theoretical approach is eclectic and is, I think, justified by the wide divergences in both style and subject matter of the novels studied. I agree with Annette Kolodny that the feminist reader needs to be “responsive to the possibilities of multiple critical schools and methods, but captive of none, recognizing that the many tools needed for our analysis will necessarily be largely inherited and only partly of our own making.” Such an analysis, according to Kolodny, is liable to prevent the critic from “oversimplifying any text.” When reading texts which are outside one’s own culture additional problems are raised. Rosemary George is one writer who has reflected on this problem and asks how can our reading of “contemporary non-western literatures do something other than provide one more avenue for reinforcing the existing western hegemony and neo-colonialism in other aspects of global relations?” Recognising the difficulties inherent in such a practice, she advocates the “need to guard against [...] allowing ourselves to take up the position of the disinterested, unimplicated ‘first world’ reader whose global responsibilities can be theoretically elided.” George seems to be suggesting that critics demonstrate an involvement in, or commitment to, this literature, although she does not suggest how this might be achieved, although presumably this would involve a rejection of all forms of cultural hegemony. One method which would certainly go some way towards resolving this problem would be if literary texts were studied against their background or the contexts in which they originate. Mineke Schipper suggests such a method which would guard the Western critic against “be[ing] swayed by standard Western or male values (or both).” Such is the aim of what she terms the “inclusive” critic, who considers literary texts against their cultural background. Schipper’s comments take into account not only questions of cultural differences but also those of gender. Kolodny’s theorising also extends to gender when she remarks how feminist literary criticism is united and invigorated by “an acute and impassioned attentiveness to the ways in which primarily male structures of power are inscribed (or encoded) within our literary inheritance,” a comment which although raised in connection with a Western literary tradition, is equally applicable to the African works studied. The method or methods of analysis I have chosen are, in each case, governed by the individual texts, all of which lend themselves to many different types of reading. My approach has been mainly thematic which incorporates close textual analysis alongside sociological, historical and psychoanalytic considerations, as well as an analysis of narrative perspective. All these are underpinned
by both feminist and postcolonial insights which not only involve gender, but also issues of sexuality, class, ethnicity, race and nationalism.

For practical purposes a working definition of a feminist approach is one which investigates how the text represents women, what it says about gender relations and how it defines sexual difference. Another trait of a feminist approach is one which deconstructs certain male stereotypes of women. In the African context, this second form deconstructs the image of the all-enduring and self-sacrificing Mother, often described as "Mother Africa," which I discuss more fully in chapters 1 and 3. An equally important aspect of feminism in the African context is one that seeks to highlight issues of colonialism and cultural imperialism in so far as these have impacted on African women. A postcolonial approach, in my view, is one which is constantly aware of the power relations between Western and "Third World" cultures, and which also reminds a Western reader of the pitfalls of ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism. It must be borne in mind however that postcolonial academic writing has often been viewed as inherently Eurocentric itself, as it becomes increasingly theoretical and remote from the more practical aspects of literary criticism. It has also been criticised for its appropriation of literary texts into the hegemonic institutions of first world academia. bell hooks' comment is relevant here, that

\[\text{even if perceived 'authorities' writing about a group to which they do not belong and/or over which they wield power, are progressive, caring, and right-on in every way, as long as their authority is constituted by either the absence of the voices of the individuals whose experiences they seek to address, or the dismissal of those voices as unimportant, the subject-object dichotomy is maintained and domination is reinforced.}\]

A question may arise as to how appropriate a feminist reading is of texts by women writers who may be ideologically opposed to feminism. There has been much recent debate as to whether African women writers consider themselves to be feminists or not, and if they do so, whether this is due to their African heritage or to imported notions of Western feminism. Some African women writers accept the term "womanist" with its notions of solidarity with African men, rather than that of "feminist." Others deny being feminists altogether because they do not wish to be associated with Western feminism, as I discuss in chapter 1 in relation to Emecheta's famous dictum: "If I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small
The wish to avoid being associated with Western feminism, however, may derive from the fact that African women sometimes talk about Western feminism as if there were only "one" feminism, and they imply that all feminists in the Western world are "man-hating." Obviously this misconstruction has been the source of much antagonism, as has the insensitive treatment by some Western feminists of African texts. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has advanced another reason for some African women writers' disassociation with Western feminism:

I would put this down to the successful intimidation of African women by men over the issues of women's liberation and feminism. Male ridicule, aggression and backlash have resulted in making women apologetic and have given the term "feminist" a bad name. Yet, nothing could be more feminist than the writings of these women writers, in their concern for and deep understanding of the experiences and fates of women in society.

Other terms which have been advocated instead of "feminism" include "Stiwanism," "Africana womanism" or a qualification of the word "feminism," for example "African feminism." In francophone Africa also a new terminology has been designated to cope with indigenous feminisms. Calixthe Beyala has invented the term "féminitude" which stresses "la différence-égalitaire entre l'homme et la femme" [the egalitarian difference between man and woman]. Such a woman would want power in three areas: "carrière, maternité et vie affective" [in her career, in her maternal role and in her emotional life]. She further elaborates on her concept of feminism in an interview where she defines it as "un mélange de féminisme et de négritude" [a blend of feminism and negritude] which promotes "la suprématie de la femme noire sur l'homme noir" [the supremacy of the African woman over the black man]. In opposition to the anglophone writers, and particularly to the "womanist" concept, Beyala's stance, at least in the second citation, appears confrontational. A different neologism for feminism has been propounded by another Cameroonian writer, Werewere Liking, with her invention of the term "misovire," [manhater] which appears to go even further than Beyala's in its advocacy of an anti-male stance. As D'Almeida notes, no word exists in the French language for a person who does not like men. She further comments: "Liking's invention is critical in that it shows how gender ideology pervades all spheres of human endeavour, including linguistic constructions." Such a variety of definitions and connotations of the concept of feminism in African anglophone and francophone literary circles is not easily
assimilated into any coherent framework. Nevertheless, allowing for what seems to be a marked difference in attitude between the anglophone and francophone writers, at least those cited who have theorised on this subject, they all point to the significant cultural differences inherent in the various terms from their Western counterparts, although there are certain ideological concepts common to all. One of the most obvious differences between them, however, is that of individualism which tends to be associated with most Western feminisms versus the communal nature of the majority of African feminisms.

An important contribution to this debate is the essay by Kirsten Holst Petersen entitled “First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature.” Holst Petersen has discussed “which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism?” and she stresses the different approach taken between Western feminists and African women. She believes that “whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural aspect.” Many African women continue to denounce Western cultural imperialism, in which Western feminism is also implicated, and this thesis draws attention to such issues in their writing and essays.

Whether the writers studied view themselves as feminists or not, is not the focus of this thesis, for every writer has her own views on this subject, some of which I have mentioned and others I will elaborate on, but in any case these are often in a state of flux. Of principal interest are the works themselves which tend to reflect the ideologies inherent in the societies described. In the following four chapters I want to focus on the way in which women’s issues are always mediated through various types of relationships. In my opening chapter I want to discuss the varying demands raised in the relationship a woman has with her social and economic roles as a mother, a wife, and a worker, all of which are central concerns in any feminist approach.
Notes


3 See the Introduction entitled “Exclusionary Practices” to Florence Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp.1-19. Not only does Stratton point to the lack of criticism on women writers, she stresses the misogynistic treatment of their work. Although the situation has changed slightly since Stratton’s study, nevertheless works are still being published which either omit women writers altogether or consider them only briefly. See, for example, Edmund L. Epstein and Robert Kole, eds., *The Language of African Literature* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1998), in which eleven writers are discussed, from West, East and Southern Africa, all of them male; Bernth Lindfors, *African Textualities: Texts, Pre-Texts and Contexts of African Literature* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press 1997), twelve writers are discussed in detail, all of them male. Moreover, Stratton’s contention, that works which deal with male writers do not feel as if they have to be gender marked, whereas those on women writers are marked for feminine gender, is still in evidence in the works cited. Ibid, pp.2-3. Examples of the latter are Susan Arndt’s *African Women’s Literature: Orature and Intertextuality* (Bayreuth: Eckhard Breitinger, 1998), and the title to this thesis, “Gender and Conflict in African Women Writers.” The feminine gender cannot be envisaged as universal, unlike the masculine gender which is considered generic.


6 Ibid., “Preface,” ix-xi, p.x. Nfah-Abennyi’s decision to read these literatures as a “complementary whole” appears to be a personal choice based on her Cameroonion nationality. She explains “These two languages [French and English] and the cultures that they promote have come together so often in my lived experiences that I can comfortably place writers from both traditions in one study without seeking to treat them as two distinct categories.” Ibid.

7 See the Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta’s interview with Reed Dasenbrock in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World* (Jackson and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), eds. Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock, pp.84-99. She states that she feels she must write “as simply as possible in English”; her “emotional” language is igbo, p.85; the Senegalese writer, Aminata Sow Fall has commented that one has to be prepared to try everything in order to overcome the obstacle of writing in French “en bousculant, s’il le faut, les formes rigides de cette langue” [in shaking up, if necessary, the rigid forms of this language]. Referring to her novel, *La Grève des battu*, she confides that she “n’hésite pas à employer des tournures africaines ou à faire, en français des écarts voulus pour cerner de plus près [s]a pensée” [does not hesitate to use African turns of phrase or to purposely break the rules in French in order to define her thinking more closely]. Interview with Moudjib Djibril


9 “‘Shaping the Truth of the Struggle’: An Interview with Yvonne Vera” by Eva Hunter in Current Writing 10.1 (1998): 75-86, p.82.

10 Ibid., p.83. As Sonia Lee suggests in her anthology, Romancières du continent noir (Paris: Hatier, 1994) “ce qu’elles revendiquent par-dessus tout, c’est le droit à l’expression.” [what they claim more than anything else is the right to express themselves], p.10.

11 Hunter, “‘Shaping the Truth of the Struggle,’” p.82. Aminata Sow Fall has also expressed doubts as to the advisability of targeting an audience, whether African or Western, believing that in this way “on brade sa propre sincerite” [one betrays one’s own sincerity] “An Interview with Senegalese Novelist Aminata Sow Fall” by Peter Hawkins, French Studies Bulletin 22 (Spring 1987): 19-21, p.18.

12 See chapter 3 where I include Nawal el Saadawi, the Egyptian physician, novelist and critic and the Libyan novelist, Evelyne Accad, and chapter 4 where I include the Lebanese writer Marie-Gisèle Aka. The exclusion of writers from South Africa is in part due to the necessity of curtailing an extremely broad study, due to lack of space, but also to this country’s political isolation during the apartheid regime in operation at the time of beginning this thesis.

13 The criterion I have used in choosing these African women authors is the country of their birth, although some of these writers now live outside Africa. For example, Calixthe Beyala and Angèle Rawiri have lived in Paris for several years while Buchi Emecheta has lived in London since 1962. An exception to this is Marie-Gisèle Aka who is included on the basis of her residency in the Ivory Coast since infancy and the fact that her novel is also set in this country.

14 See Appendix 1. A bio-bibliography is also included due to some of these writers’ being relatively unknown. The theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s work is often cited by scholars for her similar view that studies of non-Western women by Western sociologists construct a monolithic idea of “Third World Women” which serves as the “Other” for Western feminists. See “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse,” Feminist Review 30 (Autumn 1988): 61-88.

15 Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1994), p.216. My focus on Sub-Saharan writers, however, is rather due to the Maghreb’s very different cultural sphere, dominated by Islamic traditions and Arabic literature and which offers a very different experience to women writers.

16 See endnote 50 in chapter 2 for an example of the former case, and p. 40 of chapter 1 for an example of the latter case.


18 See, for example, Ifi Amadiume’s work entitled Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society (London: Zed, 1987), which highlights how women may enjoy positions of authority which are determined by factors other than gender, for example, notions of seniority, wealth and personal standing. Ogundipe-Leslie makes the same point in Re-Creating Ourselves, pp.13-14.


20 Louis Gates, Jr., ed., Black Literature and Literary Theory (New York and London: Methuen, 1984). Gates believes that due to the “curious valorization of the social and polemical functions of black literature, the structure of the black text has been repressed and treated as if it were transparent,” pp.5-6. Emphasis in original.


22 For example, Aidoo’s reference to the fact that women writers “cannot ignore” male writers’ “significant voices,” in Adeola James, ed., In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk (London: James Currey, 1990). p.19; additionally, Emecheta’s praise of Achebe as “the father of our English literature,” Dasenbrock, Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World, p.86.

Ama Ata Aidoo, *Changes — A Love Story* (London: The Women’s Press, 1991); Angèle Rawiri, *Fureurs et cris de femmes* [Women’s Cries and Fury], Paris: L’Harmattan, Collection Encres noires, 1989. All page references, inserted in the text, refer to these editions, as is the case in all of the major primary texts used. All translations of French texts, unless otherwise stated, are my own.


Ibid.


Kolodny, “Dancing through the minefield,” p.20.


I use this term advisedly, aware of its derogatory implications, yet persuaded by its widespread use and lack of a viable alternative. For a fuller discussion see, for example, Trinh T. Minh-ha’s *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Indiana University Press, 1989), p.98 and Aijaz Ahmad’s *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), pp.243-44.

Ketu Kattrak, “Decolonizing Culture: Towards a Theory for Postcolonial Women’s Texts,” p.158.


For example, Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, when discussing Western feminism, cites Jill Johnson’s definition: “Feminism at heart is a massive complaint, Lesbianism is the solution... Until all women are lesbians there will be no true political revolution,” *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1997), p.15 citing Jill Johnson in eds., Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler, *Feminist Dictionary* (London: Unwin, 1985), p.158. Modupe Kolawole claims that “[t]he majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their world-view,” p.15. It is noticeable that Kolawole feels she can speak on behalf of the “majority of ordinary Africans.”

Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves*, p.64.

“Stiwa” is an acronym invented by Molara Ogundipe Leslie for ‘Social Transformation Including Women in Africa.’ See *Re-Creating Ourselves*, pp.229-30.


Ibid., p.21.


The word *misovire* is contained in the title of Liking’s novel *Elle sera de jaspe et de corail: Journal d’une misovire* [It will be of Jasper and Coral: Journal of a Man-Hater] (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1983). D’Almeida points out that Liking offers a further definition for her neologism: “*Une femme qui n’arrive pas à trouver un homme admirable*” [A woman who cannot find an admirable man] in Liking and Marie-José Hourantier, *A la rencontre de...* [Meeting with... ] (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1980). D’Almeida suggests two different readings for Liking’s remark, either that “I cannot believe that an admirable man exists” or “an admirable man does exist, but I have not yet found him,” although the second reading seems to be stretching Liking’s version somewhat. Eloise Brière believes that the term “misovire et le discours nouveau qu’elle souhaiterait faire entendre est comme l’emblème même du discours romanestique féminin qui se fraye actuellement une voie au Cameroun” *misovire* and the new discourse it wants to make heard is indeed like the symbol of the female novelistic discourse which is


THE MODERN CAREER WOMAN: A REJECTION OF MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD?

Introduction

Changes and Fureurs et cris de femmes:
- The Modern Career Woman: The conflict between marriage and family
- Romantic Love – An illusion?
- Marriage and Sexuality – Compromise or rejection. Is there an alternative?
- Polygamous marriages and de facto relationships
- Motherhood – An introduction

Adoption: An alternative to biological motherhood? The example of Tu T'appelleras Tanga

Challenging the conventional idea of Motherhood in Changes; Fureurs et cris de femmes; The Joys of Motherhood; One is Enough

Conclusion

Introduction

In this chapter I will discuss the ways in which African women writers problematise the complexities of the marital and maternal identities of their female protagonists. The topics of marriage and motherhood often form the focus of African women’s writing and I concentrate on aspects of both, especially where they conflict with a woman’s career, in the works of several anglophone and francophone novelists, but principally in the Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo’s Changes (1991) and the Gabonese writer, Angèle Rawiri’s Fureurs et cris de femmes (1989). Such related topics as romantic love, reproduction, and sexuality will also be discussed, as Aidoo and Rawiri appear to depart from the normal preoccupations of African writers, both men and women, in their handling of these subjects.

Marriage in the African context necessitates a discussion of polygamy, although the African women writers’ approach tends to call into question this practice and underlines the many problems it raises. Polygamy seems to be viewed by these writers as increasingly obsolete in an urban environment. In times of increasing choice for women in the Western world, and a growing intercultural global awareness, African women are more than ever aware of the “double standard” that practices such as polygamy would seem to give rise to in their cultures. These
writers also emphasise a woman’s low status within marriage, stressing how she is subject to her husband and other members of his family until she has children of her own, especially sons who can look out for her interests. Women’s relationships within marriage, whether polygamous or monogamous are described as being beset with problems arising from a demanding career and domestic responsibilities and for which they receive little support from their husbands. The African male is also beset with pressures in adapting to women’s newfound independence, women who more often than not, refuse to countenance a polygamous marriage. African women writers reflect these changing attitudes in the marriages they describe, including the practice of the de facto relationship, an alternative to, or precursor of, polygamy. The marital conflict which arises in the two major novels discussed as a result of these and other influences impinges onto a situation where a couple has chosen to enter into a nuclear, monogamous marriage.

In considering the condition of motherhood, I focus on issues concerning reproduction, contraception and sterility. The notion of motherhood as encompassing the more intangible “qualities or conduct characteristic of a mother” is also relevant. Clearly such a definition lends itself to a particular conception of motherhood which will vary according to the culture and society under consideration, as well as the economic status of the woman concerned. It also raises the question of the activity of “mothering,” the relationship between the mother and her offspring, as distinct from the state of “motherhood” as an institution or ideology. Adrienne Rich underlines this difference in her study, Of Woman Born, encapsulated in its subtitle, Motherhood as Experience and Institution, when she describes what she envisions as two meanings of motherhood: “one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.” Even though Rich’s study alludes to Western society, it can be applied to situations in African societies, in which women writers discuss marital practices and customs which result in the wife being under the husband’s control. They point out how children are regarded as belonging to the father rather than the mother and how women have remained in an unhappy marriage rather than risk losing their children. They also often take issue with the custom of a marriage dowry, bride price or lobola as it is variously referred to, as well as the practice of leviticus, or wife
inheritance, where, on the death of her husband, a woman is inherited by her dead husband’s brother. Although in traditional society this practice was a way of enabling a widow and her children to gain a husband and father respectively, contemporary African women writers point to its abuses. In certain circumstances wives are not able to inherit from their husbands and this is reflected in novels where a husband’s relatives descend upon recently bereaved widows in order to claim their inheritance.

Nevertheless, motherhood is eulogised in African societies generally, giving rise to perpetuating myths of the African mother, one such belief being the association of the living “African mother” with “Mother Africa” itself. This is often reflected in the works of African male writers, where women, particularly mothers, are frequently portrayed as symbols of the nation. Whereas the African male is supreme in his role of nationalistic endeavour, a key agent in his nation’s history and identity, the African female’s contribution is generally ignored, both by the new leaders in post-independent African nations and by some male writers. Instead they worship her as an icon of the nation, the African mother as transcendent. In response to this male-centred symbolic depiction of African motherhood, African women writers depict mothers in a much more realistic manner. They may also at times make use of this same symbolic system to designate African motherhood, but their aim is to subvert, rather than to uphold, the established system, as will be noted in the work of Angèle Rawiri in this chapter. Such an apparent contradiction in the status and appraisal of parenthood in West African societies is commented on by Esther Goody. She cites “the great desire for children” and “the strong bonds between parents and children” on the one hand and the “extremely wide-spread occurrence of a variety of practices – pawning, crisis and voluntary fostering, ‘housemaids’, educational fosterage, wardship, apprenticeship – which in one form or another involve the delegation of parental roles to others.” She then asks: “If parenthood is indeed as central to and in a real sense as sacred in West African society as the evidence suggests, how does it happen that the same societies have generated institutions dependent on the giving up of parental rights?” In this chapter I note the ambiguity towards motherhood evinced by the main protagonists and discuss the practice of fostering in relation to Beyala’s Tu t’appelleras Tanga. A more detailed
consideration of the phenomenon of fostering in African societies as reflected in literature is undertaken in the following chapter.

The titles of the two novels under consideration are themselves significant. Aidoo’s novel, *Changes*, is indicative of a traditional society that is being transformed by more modern influences. With respect to marriage, Aidoo recounts the shifting roles of young African men and women faced with the between well-defined customs and traditions and the need for their adaptation to a neo- or post-colonial society, particularly as regards the contentious issue of polygamy. In connection with motherhood, Aidoo explores the issue of a modern African woman’s freedom to choose whether or not to assume the role of mother and the pressures she faces in a society where producing children is still regarded as crucial.

Rawiri’s choice of title, *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, is indicative of the pain and anger of several characters, but notably Emilienne, the principal female protagonist, through whom most of the narration is focused. Her fury and pain are attributable to her husband Joseph’s infidelity, and to her frequent miscarriages. Irène d’Almeida suggests that the title refers to the unvoiced cries of Emilienne. Although she is the most obvious embodiment of fury and pain the relevance of the title is also apparent in the dilemma experienced by two other women: Dominique, Joseph’s mistress and mother of his two children, who is desperate to marry him, and Eyang, Joseph’s mother, whose anger is directed at Emilienne, of whom she disapproves. Moreover, Emilienne’s daughter’s unvoiced cries at the time of her abduction and murder, implicit in the novel’s narrative, are equally applicable. The fury and pain thus evoked could even be said to signify the anguish and anger of all women who feel powerless in a patriarchal society.

Rawiri’s exploration of a woman’s desperation to conceive focuses attention on her reproductive role. Emilienne is considered sterile due to her frequent miscarriages in the early stages of her pregnancy, despite her having already borne one-child. She thus belongs to the category of “the sterile woman,” explored by many African writers of both sexes. Emilienne is also subject to internal conflict because, while she seems to accept her society’s precept that children, especially males, are essential for a happy marriage, she romantically yearns for one in which success is dependent solely upon the reciprocal love experienced between a husband and
wife. In *Changes* Esi concurs with Emilienne in privileging the notion of romantic love and feels no scruples in her decision not to have any more children. Questions of choice in childbirth also raise the important issue of contraception, which features in *Changes*, having previously been given little attention by African writers.

**The Modern Career Woman: The Conflict Between Marriage and Family**

African women in many societies have traditionally worked outside the domestic environment. In fact, in many instances, they have been the main cash sources since they grew the trading crops and men the subsistence goods. They also ran their own market stalls, and even today in societies like Nigeria, traditional markets are almost exclusively run by women. However, it is only in more recent post-independence times that African women have undertaken professional careers in government and industry. Early autobiographies by African francophone women writers describe some of the few professional openings for women, such as midwifery and teaching. The main protagonist of the now deceased Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ’s famous first work, *Une si longue lettre* (1986), is also a teacher but laments the lack of women in public life and politics. Autobiography has not been such a frequent choice for anglophone women writers, whose earlier novels tend to deal with pre-colonial, traditional life, but later novels also treat post-independence politics, for example Grace Ogot’s *The Graduate*. The writing of Buchi Emecheta is an interesting example of the cross-over between autobiography and fiction. Besides her formal autobiography, *Head Above Water* (1986), many of her novels are semi-autobiographical and chart her growth as a writer, especially her first two published works set in England, *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1977). Emecheta has told of how her husband, Francis, tore up the first novel she wrote, which was eventually published under the title *The Bride Price* (1976). This attitude is perhaps not that uncommon when one considers the strong sense of reserve in connection with family life in many African cultures, especially as it relates to the woman’s role and questions of power within the family unit. If marriage is not always conducive to writing, motherhood it seems is not a deterrent. Emecheta has written how she would have been unable to write if it were not for the “sweet background noises” of her children. Perhaps, though, Emecheta’s views are not representative of African
women writers as a whole, as Aidoo’s comments on the matter would suggest. She believes that women writers, especially mothers, have a difficult task in finding the time and the energy to write. Indeed, in both the novels to be studied in this chapter, *Changes* and *Fureurs*, career demands constitute a major conflict in relationships with husbands, lovers, and children.

In *Changes* Esi’s career is the cause of her marital strife with first husband, Oko as she feels that she needs more space for both herself and her bureaucratic career. Oko’s feeling of neglect precipitates an act of marital rape. This sexual violence acts as a catalyst in forcing Esi to acknowledge that her marriage is finally over. Oko is only too aware of his wife’s motives: “To think that your woman is being cold to you because of another man is almost ennobling [...] But to have to fight with your woman’s career for her attention is not only new in the history of the world, but completely humiliating”(pp.69-70). That this view is prevalent in African society is foregrounded by the narrator via the mother and grandmother who also have problems with Esi’s reasons for wanting a divorce. Even Esi herself cannot come to terms with the situation. She tells her mother and grandmother that “Her husband wanted too much of her and her time. No, it was not another woman. In fact, she thought she might have welcomed that even more”(p.38). Both Esi and Oko would seem to be more comfortable with more conventional causes for the break-up of a marriage, such as infidelity. The reasons given by Esi for her unhappiness are not considered to be legitimate by the more traditional elements of society and both protagonists appear to endorse this reasoning. In these circumstances Esi’s emancipation may be illusory.

In *Changes* the complex issue of a woman’s attitude to the workplace is developed in the manner is which Esi perceives herself as disadvantaged by her sex. She insists on taking work home because she feels she has to work twice as hard as her male colleagues because she is often passed over for promotion. This same question of gender discrimination is broached at the novel’s outset when Esi visits the travel agents used by her department to clarify some travel arrangements, but resents the allocation to her of such a menial task: “In spite of how strongly she felt about it all, why couldn’t she ever prevent her colleagues from assuming that any time the office secretary was away, she could do the job? And better, still, why couldn’t she prevent
herself from falling into that trap?”(p.1). In this manner the author emphasises the possibility of a self-imposed female oppression stemming from women’s conditioning in a patriarchal society.

The plight of the African career woman is further highlighted with regard to the problems arising from the birth of Esi’s daughter. Although it is apparent that either she or her husband must make career concessions to accommodate parental responsibilities, this is never raised as an issue by Esi, who assumes, correctly, that her husband will not relocate. Esi is effectively forced to accept demotion. When she complains she does not need a Masters degree in Statistics for such work, Oko shows no sympathy. Her problem is compounded by her male colleagues who make her feel unwelcome. Esi’s reaction to this is amusingly insightful: “Having to deal with a man who is over-qualified is bad enough. To have to cope with an over-qualified woman in any situation is a complete misfortune” (p.41). However, during the course of the novel Esi shows less willingness to compromise with her career. In her second marriage to Ali, she refuses to entertain the idea of any more children and is even able to welcome his declining interest in her as allowing herself more time to devote to her career.

The conflict between motherhood and a career is also explored in Ali’s first marriage, to Fusema, who experiences a sense of loss and waste having abandoned any chance of a fulfilling career, for which she has been trained, in favour of commitments as a wife and mother. When Ali and Fusema move to England, she is forced to stay at home to look after her children as she does not have the support of an extended family. Such an assessment seems to imply that if the family had remained in Africa she might have been able to pursue her career. Emecheta seems to endorse this view with her comment that African women have always worked because of their extended family situation and supportive culture, but that British women should take advantage of the facilities available to them in their own culture, such as nannies and nursery schools, in order to go out to work. Instead, Fusema is aware that Ali is busy improving his qualifications, whereas she becomes less employable the longer she is out of work. Nor does her situation improve upon their return to Africa. Ali is dismissive of Fusema’s suggestion that she should return to schoolteaching, stressing not only how badly remunerated her profession is, but that it is his role to support his family. Indeed, this novel is important in the way that it underlines how popular stereotypes can mislead. For example, many Western readers may
assume that what Ali says is a typical non-Western view, that the male is responsible in supporting his wife and family. The text shows clearly that this is not the case as the description of Fusema’s situation demonstrates: “like nearly all West African women, she had been brought up in a society that had no patience with a woman who did not work. Her husband’s wealth or ability to support her was a matter of only mild importance – just something that could make her life easier” (p.67). By reinforcing her financial and emotional dependence and insinuating that her career is of little consequence because it is poorly paid, Ali compounds Fusema’s feelings of inadequacy. In this dispute between Ali and Fusema, therefore, two different views of African tradition are represented. Ali’s view, and those of other fictional husbands, is the product of a reconstituted and biased account of “African ways” which women writers and historians have increasingly challenged as a false patriarchal reading of the past.29

In fact, in order to try and pacify his wife, Ali buys her a kiosk in which to trade. The reader is not made aware of Fusema’s reaction to this, but it is clear that the decision is taken out of her hands, Ali deciding what is best for his wife. It is highly unlikely, however, that she would find such work stimulating or fulfilling as she is clearly aware of the waste of her education. It is interesting to note that when Ali tells Fusema that he is considering taking a second wife, her most obvious concern is that Esi is well educated, with a university degree. She feels vastly inferior in this respect and very bitter, as she has sacrificed all thoughts of a similar career for her marriage and children. She must watch her husband become progressively more qualified and successful in his career and marry a graduate, also a successful career woman, who is the very image of what she herself would like to be.30

The third main female protagonist in this novel, Opokuya, Esi’s closest friend, also experiences great difficulties in trying to cope with a very demanding career as a midwife at the local hospital and her family commitments. In her frequent discussions with Esi, Opokuya betrays her dissatisfaction with her own marriage and her discontent surfaces most evidently in the running dispute that she shares with her husband over his government-owned car. Every morning they have the same altercation about who is to drive the car, and however lightly the narrator treats these episodes, it is clear that for Opokuya there is more at stake than the petty triumph of an argument won over her husband. This is particularly apparent in the way she
reacts to Ali’s gift of a new car to Esi – she is unable to conceal her jealousy. Esi offers Opokuya her old car but the latter insists on a “token” payment. In *Changes* cars appear to play a symbolic role. Equated with freedom and independence, they can thereby be linked to female emancipation, so that the transfer of Esi’s car to Okopuya is ultimately a symbolic gesture of women’s solidarity in the struggle for their liberation. A similar example of sorority also occurs in Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* when Assiatou makes such a gift to Ramatoulaye. In contrast to the mutually supportive female relationships depicted, Ali’s reason for presenting Esi with an expensive new car is less altruistic and stems rather from a guilty conscience because of his diminishing interest in her, as she herself recognises. Esi’s acceptance of this gift under these circumstances stresses her emotional dependence upon him. It is in marked contrast to their very first encounter when Esi refuses a lift from Ali and insists on driving her decrepit old car. In this instance, her decision represents her desire for independence.

If marriage presents such problems for African women with both careers and families, is there a viable alternative? In *Changes* the possibility of a single life for women in Africa today is raised, only to be categorically dismissed. In a humorous exchange Esi and Opokuya discuss the fact that African men do not encourage their wives to act autonomously. According to Opokuya, African men are “not really interested in a woman’s independence or her intelligence. The few who claim they like intelligent and active women are also interested in having such women permanently in their beds and in their kitchens”(p.45). Opokuya believes that this may be precisely the reason why marriage is so impossible: men are initially attracted to women who are bright, no doubt in part due to a demanding and stimulating job. However, once married to such women, these men want them to abandon their careers in order to devote all their attention to them, a situation Oko would obviously prefer. Consequently wives are forced to take on less demanding and less stimulating employment, become bored in their work and less interesting to their partners, and so the men move on. It appears that Ali’s attitude towards Fusema is determined by a relationship of this kind. It seems, however, that life as a single woman is an unattractive option for Esi and Opokuya who jokingly recognise their society’s fixed views on single women. Esi remarks that in the past women were probably branded witches if they persisted in insulting the “glorious manhood”(p.48) of African men and ostracised until they became crazy. Members of both Esi’s and Okos’s family refer to Esi as a witch for this very
reason. She is condemned as such for not conforming to society’s expectations, and because of its incomprehension of her actions.  

Ironically, a Western education, which provides African women with more choices in their lives, also renders a woman’s marriage more problematic, due to their increased opportunities and expectations. As is so often the case in texts by African women, the viewpoint of the grandmother seems to be particularly valorised. Although Esi’s grandmother finds it hard to accept Esi’s desire for freedom, she recognises nevertheless that women’s relationships with men have never been easy and that a double standard has always operated: “Remember a man always gained in stature through any way he chose to associate with a woman. And that included adultery. Especially adultery. Esi, a woman has always been diminished in association with a man”(pp.109-10). Esi’s grandmother even draws a parallel between the last wish granted to a man on the eve of his execution and the way a young woman on her wedding day was made much of “because that whole ceremony was a funeral of the self that could have been”(p.110). This belief corroborates Esi’s opinion about marriage which, she considers, prevents women from realising their full potential. Her grandmother, however, is more pragmatic and upholds the traditional ethos that a woman’s primary function is reproductive. She tells Esi that “the last man any woman should think of marrying is the man she loves”(p.42) because “love is dangerous”(p.42) and cannot be relied on. In poverty and hardship it is reliability that counts. At the same time she insists that “the best husband you can ever have is he who demands all of you and all of your time”(p.109). Even though Esi is initially committed to her marriage with Oko, it only serves to stifle her, whereas her grandmother sees her status in a positive light, possibly because in her own youth a married woman’s life was more centred on her family, whereas Esi has the choice of a fulfilling career. Perhaps her grandmother’s view is also shaped by the generally dismissive attitude towards women, encapsulated in Ali’s grandfather’s opinion of them: “He had owned an impressive number of sons, cattle, horses, sheep, goats, wives and daughters. All definitely in that order of value”(p.24).

It is evident that in this novel Aidoo is not only concerned to show her women characters as autonomous individuals but also to point to the complexity of gender roles by endowing Esi...
with “masculine” characteristics and describing Ali as somewhat “feminised.” With regard to Esi’s driving we learn: “Esi parked expertly, jumped out of the car, locked it and strode towards the reception desk of the hotel, her shoes beating out the determination in her mind” (p.31). Not only does the narrator stress Esi’s skill as a driver, particularly telling in the male stereotypical view of women as bad drivers, a trait also detectable in Western societies, but she is described as purposeful and dynamic. She also appears to possess more of a masculine physique, being described by her mother as “too tall, too thin, and [with] a flat belly and flat behind” (p.41). The narrator describes Ali in more feminine terms, laying great stress on his physical beauty which he emphasises with make-up. Unlike Esi he is not considered tall, his skin is “smooth and black [...] His teeth [...] were beautifully even and white. He wore kohl around his eyes, moved like a panther, and was very good looking” (p.22). With such a blurring of masculine and feminine characteristics, perhaps the narrator is stressing that male and female roles are societal constructs and that a more flexible approach to gender roles is needed in a changing society. Aidoo has commented, in answer to a question about why she always describes her women as strong, that “It seems to me natural that one should see women as they are operating in their lives. I’ve never believed that women are soft at all.”

In *Fureurs* the themes of career, marriage and family are focused on the novel’s main protagonist, Emilienne, married to Joseph for about fifteen years, with a twelve-year old daughter, Rékia. As in *Changes*, the responsibility of caring for Rékia causes problems between Emilienne and Joseph. Rékia’s abduction brings them to a head and Emilienne makes it clear that she blames her husband for allowing Rékia to go to school unaccompanied. Joseph’s responsibilities towards his children by his mistress are an additional cause of stress, especially when he confides to Emilienne his dream of bringing these children to the family home.

The disintegration of Emilienne’s and Joseph’s marriage is presaged at the announcement of their engagement to Emilienne’s mother as she makes it clear that she disapproves of the proposed marriage because the two families belong to different ethnic groups. Emilienne’s mother, Rondani, is convinced that Joseph only wishes to marry her daughter to wreak vengeance, Joseph’s ancestors having been slaves to Emilienne’s forbears, but her main objection is that in Joseph’s ethnic group all children are considered to belong to the male
lineage. She warns Emilienne that her children would not belong to her. It is possible to read the eventual failure of their union, as well as the antagonism of their parents towards one another, as symbolising the difficulty in resolving the conflict between different ethnic groups and tribes in Africa. A major cause of marital strife in *Fureurs* is Emilienne’s high profile employment as a manager. Joseph cannot tolerate his wife’s greater earning capacity and the fact that the house they live in, including the servant, are provided as a result of her job and not his. Despite initial acceptance of this situation, his attitude becomes increasingly jaundiced because of his own failure to gain promotion at work and Emilienne’s efforts to reassure him are to no avail: “Aucun homme, pas même le plus libéral, n’accepte d’être dans une situation financière inférieure à celle de son épouse” (p. 72) [No man, not even the most liberal, accepts being in a financial situation inferior to that of his wife].

When Joseph looks back to try to understand why his marriage is failing, he feels almost certain that it began about the time of Emilienne’s frequent miscarriages. However, although he seems to believe that it is his wife’s inability to have another child that has driven him away, it is clear from the following quotation that it is because he is no longer so much in love with his wife: “L’homme amoureux qu’il était avait minimisé ces détails” (p. 94). [the man in love that he was had minimised these details]. In contrast, Joseph feels vindicated in his relationship with his mistress, as not only does he support her financially, but she has provided him with a son. Reflecting on his mistress’s lower status, he confesses that he understands why “des cadres” [executives] marry “des paysannes” [peasants]. In this respect he is similar to Ousmane in Mariama Bâ’s *Un chant écarlate* who, unable to relate to his French wife because he considers her too “emancipated,” chooses instead, as a second wife, an African woman who makes him feel needed.

Ironically, despite Emilienne’s important position, she does not give the impression of being totally dedicated to her work, as does Esi in *Changes*. She allots more priority to her failing marriage so that her personal troubles start to impinge upon her working life – she is increasingly absent, neglects her health and suffers a breakdown. Such an ambivalent attitude towards her career, however, may not be a reflection of Emilienne’s lack of dedication but rather of the corruption and nepotism operating in the work environment. In this manner Rawiri
points towards work practices which may be considered endemic in post-colonial African society. Although Joseph feels threatened by Emilienne’s career, her professional ability is a source of pride to him, especially when she is chosen as a delegate to a United Nations Women’s Conference, subsequently representing this Conference in a televised debate on women’s equality. Emilienne also regularly attends a women’s political meeting. It is evident that she derives much satisfaction from such activities, and public championing of African women’s political rights seems to furnish Emilienne with the confidence she needs to make a definitive break with Joseph.

Many African writers and critics have commented on the importance of work to African women. Emecheta’s remark, in the interview already referred to, that, unlike Western women, African women have never simply been content to stay at home and look after their children, is typical. Emecheta uses this occasion to indicate why African women have difficulty in identifying with Western feminism. However, Emecheta’s remarks ignore the possibility that African women have not always worked outside the home from choice. Although, in the context of the urban, educated, upper middle-class African woman her remark is valid, in relationship to the African woman who has always been expected to work outside the home, as well as within it, it may rather be regarded as an added burden for them. In choosing educated, professional career women as their protagonists, both Aidoo and Rawiri highlight how their work allows them a focus in times of personal crisis, and provides them with a sense of self-worth. In the case of Emilienne, her interest in women’s politics also suggests wider beneficial repercussions for women with its advocacy of literacy programmes. Despite a woman’s career being the cause of marital strife, Aidoo and Rawiri stress its positive attributes and suggest that husbands must come to terms with their wives’ right to exercise choice in this matter.

Romantic love – an illusion?

According to the Nigerian poet and critic Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, African writers “have tended not to deal much with romantic love,” citing Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* as an exception, although, by the time of her comments, both Aidoo’s *Changes* and Nwapa’s *Women*
are Different (1981) had been published. Indeed, in both francophone and anglophone writing the topic of romantic love is being increasingly addressed by African women writers. Ogundipe-Leslie’s comment on the scarcity of writing on romantic love may stem from her belief that rural women tend to be “more self-reliant and enterprising” to the point that it is suggested “there were no romantic relations between men and women in pre-colonial Africa or even today in the rural areas.” Ogundipe-Leslie believes that “romantic love existed traditionally and continues to exist” but that it has not always been prioritised. Instead what was important was the “spiritual and physical continuity of the group.” She therefore appears to suggest that self-reliance and enterprise are not compatible with romantic love, and that such love is equated with emotional dependency. Certainly in the novels discussed romantic love has the tendency to disempower the female protagonists socially in their refusal to acknowledge that marriage is primarily a means to procreation, but at the same time, ironically, romantic love endows them with a sense of emotional empowerment.

In Women are Different Nwapa depicts the effect of romantic fiction on her four young Missionary schoolgirl protagonists. According to Florence Stratton, the “True Romances” fiction consumed by these protagonists, is “a particularly pernicious form of patriarchal discourse in the effect it has on female psychological development.” As these young girls become adults they have unrealistic expectations about relationships with the opposite sex as a result of reading such fiction. When their romantic ideals are shattered, unlike the protagonists in Changes and Fureurs, they have no strong attachment to careers or to women’s groups to fall back upon. Stratton believes that Nwapa “interrogates the conventions of romantic fiction, undercutting them with irony and parody. Contrary to the girls’ expectations, there are no ‘happily-ever-after’ endings to their own stories.” Although Nwapa’s novel appears to be critiquing the romantic attitudes of her young protagonists, it may also be considered as belonging to the “romance” genre where the romantic experiences of the heroines are at the novel’s centre. In the final chapter to this thesis I consider the “romance” genre, both in its Western and African context, and comment on any differences between these in relation to two francophone novels.
Just as Nwapa in *Women are Different*, in her use of “True Romance” literature, appears to be critiquing Western concepts of romantic love and the imbibing of these romantic ideals by African women, so too do Aidoo and Rawiri. With respect to *Changes* Aidoo has stated that she has had to “eat her words” for writing a novel about lovers in Accra when there are so many other important issues to address in Africa. Yet a further comment of Aidoo’s offers more insight on this subject: “I’ve grown to see that life is not just politics or the liberation struggle, or even economics: love is political, and everything is intertwined.” In both *Changes* and *Fureurs* the heroines have a fairly idealised, romantic view of love which seems to take precedence over maternal love. Esi finds little romantic fulfilment in her first marriage, resenting any emotional demands made upon her by her husband. In her second marriage, romantic love seems to take precedence over everything else in her life for a short time, but once she marries Ali, and he begins to show less interest in her, she immerses herself in her career. In *Fureurs*, Emilienne seems to be governed by a rather simplistic view of adult relationships, and envisions the whole courting process as a power game. Consequently her vision of gender roles is stereotypical and limited. She feels that in a society where men always have the last word, a woman is only powerful when a man desires her and pursues her: “C’est le moment où s’accumulent les présents et se multiplient les attentions... Il faut bien admettre que ces instants sont les plus merveilleux dans la vie d’une femme” (p.111) [It is the moment when presents accumulate and attentions are multiplied [...] One must really admit that these moments are the most marvellous in a woman’s life].

Such an attitude corresponds to a somewhat reductive perception of a woman’s beliefs and function, yet it seems to be the case both in Emilienne’s attitude in her relationship with Joseph and in Esi’s to Ali. Emilienne sees herself as an object to be courted rather than a human being in a reciprocal relationship. Her tendency to romanticism is also seen as she conceptualises her love affair in cinematic terms, with its glamorous film stars and portrayals of romance: “Son histoire d’amour défile devant elle comme sur un écran géant” (p.13) [Her love affair passes in front of her as if on a giant screen]. Stratton’s comment in relation to the influence of romantic love on Nwapa’s protagonists, that it “thwarts visions of authentic selfhood and general liberation,” is equally applicable to both Esi and Emilienne. The lack of authentic selfhood is
certainly apparent in *Fureurs*. As Emilienne reflects on the whole process of falling in love and on the progression of a relationship, she believes that:

Le regard amoureux du courtisan est si pénétrant et si tristement sincère, qu'elle se hâte d’abréger ses moments de calvaire pourtant délicieux pour elle, par le don de son être. Elle est alors à ses yeux la reine. [...] Ils se nourrissent de la sève abondante de leur amour éternel... Une éternité qui, hélas! ne durera pas longtemps. Car il sera accoutumé trop vite à ce bonheur. (pp.111-12)

[The amorous look of the suitor is so penetrating and so sadly sincere, that she hastens to shorten his moments of suffering which are nevertheless delicious for her, by the gift of her being. She is then, in his eyes, the queen. [...] They nourish one another with the abundant sap of their eternal love... An eternity which, alas! will not last long. For he will become only too quickly accustomed to this happiness].

In this highly romantic passage, undermined by parodic language, the narrator is stressing man’s fickle nature, a theme that is similarly addressed in *Changes*. No doubt Rawiri, via her heroine, is reminding us of women’s general susceptibility to flattery and exposing the male tendency to see women as objects to be conquered and then discarded. The whole tone of this passage, the style, the syntax, and the emotions conveyed, combine to make Emilienne the mouthpiece of stereotypical attitudes. Yet Rawiri, through her heroine, parodies women’s romantic tendencies at the same time as giving further psychological depth to her character’s complex femininity. After all, if women are straitjacketed and categorised into various “feminine” roles it is not surprising that they eventually come to believe in them.

Other writers have commented on the theme of romantic love in literature. Lydie Dooh Bunya, in response to whether she feels romantic love between a couple is a Westernised vision, responds: “nous avons [les Africains] dans l’organisme les mêmes composants que les autres êtres humains. Et pour ce qui est de l’amour, même en éprouvant des sentiments très, très forts, par pudeur, nous faisons comme si de rien n’était.” [we Africans are just the same as other human beings. And as far as love is concerned, even when we experience very, very strong feelings, we make light of them due to a sense of propriety]. In other words, there are certain cultural codes which must be followed. Emecheta, however, insists that there are marked differences of approach to this subject by African women. She has pronounced herself sceptical of romantic relationships, believing that any romantic dreams young women may have are soon dispelled when they start having children and transfer their loyalty to them. Extending these
more practical considerations, she claims that: “African feminism is free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions and tends to be much more pragmatic. We believe that we are here for many, many things, not just to cultivate ourselves, and make ourselves pretty for men.”

One would not have to be a proponent of Western feminism(s) to dispute this generalised, stereotypical view of Western women. Such entrenched attitudes help explain the impasse which exists between proponents of either Western feminisms or African cultural beliefs.

Marriage and Sexuality – Compromise or Rejection. Is there an alternative?

It is perhaps because they view modern day heterosexual relationships as dysfunctional that African women writers are beginning to explore homosexual relationships in their writing, although as yet little has been written on this subject in African literature. Calixthe Beyala alludes to the silence on this topic in her novel C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée: “La femme et la femme. Nul ne l’a écrit; nul ne l’a dit. Aucune prévision” (p.158) [Woman and woman. Nobody has written it; nobody has said it. Never foreseen, p.107]. Ogundipe-Leslie also reflects further on Beyala’s observation when she comments that “there is still too much silence and silencing” in this area. However writers such as Beyala are broaching the subject. In C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée there is a strong intimation that its main protagonist, Ateba, is attracted to her best friend, Irène. In her first novel, Our Sister Killjoy, Aidoo describes a lesbian advance made by a German woman, Marija, to Sissie, the African protagonist referred to in the novel’s title. While Sissie is clearly drawn towards Marija, to the point when she imagines a reciprocal relationship, she knows that “their love was doomed” and rejects her advance. Is Aidoo herself perhaps intimating that she does not envisage lesbianism as a viable option for the African woman faced with the current status quo of unequal heterosexual relationships? Chris Dunton’s comments in this respect are perceptive. He notes that Aidoo’s approach is “nonpejorative” but that this is counteracted slightly by her description of both Marija and Sissie as “defined by what, in the context of African literature, must be read as highly nonrepresentative characteristics.” In other words, Aidoo is not describing a situation
which could be applied non-problematically to more “mainstream” protagonists. In this way she raises the issue of lesbianism but also strategically distances herself from it.

This would seem to be the case with regard to Rawiri and her treatment of the lesbian interlude in *Fureurs* which seems to be interpolated into the novel as a rather melodramatic plot device, as is the case with Rékia’s murder. Emilienne, as a favour to Joseph, employs his mistress as her secretary while unaware of the latter’s identity. This situation leads to a lesbian relationship between Emilienne and Dominique. The astute reader, deducing that Dominique is Joseph’s mistress, is equally able to perceive the reasons behind Dominique’s ploy, enticing Emilienne into a sexual relationship to charm Emilienne’s affections away from Joseph so that she can have him for herself. However, Emilienne, denied any form of loving support from her husband and also having lost her daughter, is shown to be vulnerable to such a relationship. The love affair is portrayed less as an interesting outcome of shared esteem and mutual attraction between two women than, in Dominique’s case, the result of an ulterior motive, and in Emilienne’s, as a fall from grace, as she herself sees it. Her shame at her conduct is revealed by her reference to this affair as “cet épisode salissant de ma vie” (p161) [this dirty episode in my life]. The episode is treated rather superficially by Rawiri who does not appear interested in developing this subject or explaining it in more detail. Certainly Rawiri highlights, as a result of Dominique’s attitude, an example of women’s relationships which are aggressive and competitive, unlike Aidoo’s views of sisterhood, although there are examples of the latter in *Changes*.

The lesbian interlude in *Fureurs* also lends itself to exploration from a narratological perspective. The descriptions of Dominique, focused through Emilienne’s eyes, present a sexual response not incompatible with the so-called “male gaze.” Dominique is always perceived by Emilienne in terms of her physical attractiveness and sexuality, the following description being only one among many: “une chemise noire transparente, à travers laquelle on peut voir ses seins enfermés dans un soutien-gorge blanc” (p.66) [a black see-through blouse through which her breasts, enclosed in a white bra, are visible]. Does this rather voyeuristic description of Dominique’s somewhat suggestive appearance intimate Emilienne’s as yet unacknowledged proclivity towards lesbianism? Or is the narrator, because Dominique plays
the rather melodramatic role of the *femme fatale* or "other woman," purposely stereotyping her by her clichéd descriptions? Their first physical contact occurs after witnessing a public execution from the vantage point of Emilienne's office. The juxtaposition of these two events creates a morbid, semi-sadistic atmosphere where sexual excitement is linked to violent death. This could again be considered as a melodramatic ploy to associate violence with lesbianism: "Les deux corps unis des jeunes femmes frémissent du même émoi" (p.101) [The two united bodies of the young women shudder with the same emotion]. It is pertinent to question whether Rawiri's approach is a reflection of the author's own personal moral stance or whether she feels unable to address such a subject with equanimity because of the general lack of writing and critical debate in this area. Commenting on the issue of lesbianism in *Fureurs*, d'Almeida cites a critic on Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* who believes that in this novel "lesbianism is portrayed not as something which is necessarily biologically determined, but as a choice women can make as an alternative to oppressive sexual relations with men." It seems that the African women writers discussed do not, as yet, incorporate such a vision in their writing. As the critic Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has stated: "unfortunately, lesbian and gay discourses have not yet received earnest attention in African thought. Same-sex sexuality in Africa is only beginning to be discussed." In *Changes* the sexuality explored is purely heterosexual although the issue of marital rape, already alluded to, is presented, which is unusual in African literature. It could also be argued that the subject of marital rape is given somewhat cursory treatment by Aidoo, tending to be trivialised and presented as "just the excuse" that Esi needs to leave her husband. In order to reinforce the ludicrousness of Esi's situation and to widen it into a more public domain, Aidoo, in ironical mode, focuses on Esi's thoughts as she imagines herself or some other woman sociologist presenting a paper on "The Prevalence of Marital Rape in the Urban African Environment." Her audience would consist of predominantly male academics, hostile to such "imported feminist ideas" (p.11). Although the irony in this passage produces a humourous
context in which to discuss the serious issue of male sexual aggression, nevertheless Esi’s shame and confusion are tangible. According to Esi, the concept of marital rape is unheard of in African society, as “Sex is something a husband claims from his wife as his right. Any time. And at his convenience” (p.12). Esi is even aware that many African women would be envious of her husband’s degree of passion. According to one critic “Aidoo tentatively raises the issue…but never really dwells on the subject. It is as if both Esi and the author realize that in an African society there could not possibly be an ‘indigenous word or phrase for it’.” Another critic suggests that “we appear to be encouraged to devalue the issue of marital rape in the neocolonial African context,” although this is debatable because Aidoo leaves the reader in no doubt as to the feelings of degradation suffered by Esi as she attempts to “cleanse” herself, but to no avail.  

Buchi Emecheta is the only other African woman writer known to me who has also broached the subject of marital rape. She has written on the subject of rape (non-marital) in several of her novels, for example, *The Rape of Shavi* (1985), where rape is represented both literally and figuratively and in *The Family* (1990), where rape is in the form of incest, to be discussed in chapter 4. In *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), she presents the issue of marital rape somewhat equivocally as the main protagonist, Nnu Ego, does not totally admit to herself that she has been sexually abused. She is indeed prepared to suffer the indignity of a brutal sexual act by her new husband, Nnaife, just in the hope that he will impregnate her, as her first husband failed to do. On the first night of their meeting, when Nnu Ego is tired after having travelled all day, Nnaife:

> demanded his marital right as if determined not to give her a chance to change her mind […] Nnu Ego knew why horrible-looking men raped women, because they are aware of their inadequacy. This one worked himself into an animal passion. She was sure he had never seen a woman before. She bore it, and relaxed as she had been told [to do]. (p.44)

Although what takes place in this scene is tantamount to marital rape, Emecheta’s protagonist, even though she actually pronounces the word “rape” to herself, does so in such a way as to make the statement a general one, something that other men do to their wives and thus refuses to really acknowledge to herself that such an incident has occurred. As suggested by Tuzyline Jita Allan, “while the statement analogically links Nnu Ego’s experience with female rape, it
also undermines the idea that her experience is a rape. The subversive opportunity embodied in “raped” is thus lost and with it the voice of protest against sexual violence.65 Combined with Nnu Ego’s self-delusion is the ever-present hope that she may yet be fulfilled as a mother. Such conduct reflects the lengths that African women are prepared to go to in order to become fully accepted members of their societies.66

Another rather unusual treatment of sexuality in Changes is the description of the sexual act itself. Both in the instance of Esi’s marital rape and her consensual sexual encounter with her lover, Ali, the experience is graphically filtered through both partners’ consciousness. Esi’s apparent sexual emancipation is remarked upon by Ali in a scene when the former walks naked around her bedroom. He is struck by how much at ease Esi appears to be about her own body, reflecting on how unusual this is for women from his part of the world. He believes they are inhibited due to a combination of factors: “traditional shyness and contempt for the biology of women; Islamic suppressive ideas about women; English Victorian prudery and French hypocrisy imported by the colonisers”(p.75). Ali points to various cultural and religious influential factors on a woman’s sexual conduct, at the same time emphasising their patriarchal nature. Certainly the colonisers’ societies, including their religion, were patriarchal, with Islam in particular contributing to a woman’s subjugation and reinforcing Africa’s indigenous patriarchal attitudes.67 However, in spite of such factors, Aidoo does present a heroine who seems to accept her sexuality, as well as refusing to be a victim of male sexual aggression.

**Polygamous marriages and defacto relationships**

In Changes the issue of polygamy is introduced with Esi’s decision to marry Ali and become his second wife. Although Ali would appear to fulfil Islamic requirements, whereby a man is allowed up to four wives provided that he can treat them equally (otherwise only one is permitted), he fails to comply. Although in financial terms he is able to treat his wives equally, he finds it more difficult to follow the moral and emotional adherence he owes his wives.
Interpretations of the Koran have of course been open to much debate; scholars have intimated that “Allah’s real intention had been to impose at least a moral restriction on plural marriages or to eliminate polygyny altogether.”

The handling of polygamy in this novel provides several different perspectives, including the viewpoints of both sexes and of different generations. In spite of the fact that Ali’s religion permits polygamy, Esi’s reaction, as a non-Muslim – and as a non-practising Christian – is that their marriage would be bigamous rather than polygamous. In fact, her approach towards polygamy seems rather unusual in that she appears to view it as an interesting experiment and, in this respect, she epitomises the Western scientific, anthropological viewpoint. Ali believes that Esi’s sceptical reaction towards polygamy stems from her imbibing of Western colonialist attitudes, although, ironically, it is he who seems most confused about his role as a polygamous husband and adulterer.

Ali’s circle of friends, presumably also well-educated and affluent, also oppose polygamy and the same attitude recurs, perhaps more surprisingly, in the older generations. Esi’s mother and grandmother oppose her second marriage, not so much because of any scruples regarding polygamy itself, but because Esi’s mother believes that Esi’s status as a second wife is inappropriate, given her education and respectable career. Moreover, on a more idiosyncratic level, they are also still very fond of Esi’s first husband. As for Ali’s relatives, they are amazed that someone who is modern and educated should want a second wife. They are also concerned that the custom of polygamy is not being carried out in the correct manner as seen in their uneasiness that Fusema is unaware of Ali’s plans to remarry. His female relatives, whose task it is to convince Fusema to accept a polygamous re-marriage, are also surprised that she, after all her education, must still endure the same practice they had endured: “It was a man’s world. You only survived if you knew how to live in it as a woman. What shocked the older women though, was obviously how little had changed for their daughters – school and all!” (p.106).

Fusema’s attitude is reminiscent of that of Ramatoulaye in Une si longue lettre in the way that, with few options available, she decides to accept the situation and make the best of it. In both
cases, and in many other novels, husbands fail to follow the path dictated by Islam, of consultation with their existing wife/wives. For both wives in Changes and in Une si longue lettre the second marriage is presented as a fait accompli, as is of course Joseph's living in a de facto relationship in Fureurs. Perhaps authors such as Aidoo, Rawiri and Bâ wish to question the relevance of polygamy in a post-independent urban society. However, not all African women writers, or African women themselves for that matter, totally oppose polygamy. Others who have expressed an opinion on this matter include Emecheta. Considering the latter's often scathing description of this practice in her novels, it is perhaps surprising that she believes that polygamy can be beneficial to women "in certain cases."69 This qualified remark is often quoted as a full endorsement of polygamy by her, which is obviously not the case. On the other hand Mariama Bâ has described polygamy as a means of "legalising a man's escapades."70 Certainly there are very divergent views on this practice both by African women writers themselves as well as by African critics, as discussed in the conclusion to this chapter.

What is certain is the way that the very title Changes encapsulates Aidoo's focus on a changing traditional society as it is increasingly intersected by modern influences. Before developing this idea further, one should acknowledge that tradition itself is a problematic concept. Writers such as Anthony Appiah and Terence Ranger have pointed to the dangers inherent in regarding precolonial Africa as a monolithic entity rather than as the site of diverse, constantly evolving traditions.71 Aidoo embraces this idea of adaptation to a changing society not only thematically, but also in terms of both structure and narrative voice. A great deal of her narrative seems to be based on the orature that is so important in African culture. For example, much of the writing in Changes takes the form of dialogues through which the reader constructs character, rather than relying on lengthy descriptions of characters and events. Aidoo chose the genre of playwriting for her first work72 and she has stated her preference for this medium,73 a preference that is re-endorsed in the novel's dramatic techniques.

The narrative structure also serves to convey the protagonists' changing attitude towards their relationships and the tempo of their love affairs. Following Ali and Esi's meeting at the beginning of the novel, the reader is unaware of any developments in their relationship until it is mentioned in a chance encounter between Esi and Opokuya. This reference to a fait accompli
from the point of view of the reader indicates the rapid progression of their relationship in which they quickly become lovers. Their passionate affair, consisting of fleeting encounters in hotel rooms, which emphasize its illicit nature, contrasts with the much more detailed description of the friendship between Ali and Fusema, which only later develops into a love affair. Subsequent to Ali’s and Esi’s own marriage and the disintegration of their relationship, there is an allusion to Ali’s new secretary, when Esi learns that he gives her a lift home from work. This brief mention intimates Ali’s interest in another woman, who is destined to become his third wife, and the small amount of narrative detail allotted to her character reflects the relative insignificance of her future marital and fictional status.  

Aidoo’s tracing of Esi’s love affair is subject to the demands of both tradition and modernity. With respect to tradition, there are detailed descriptions of the customs and procedures in the planning of a wedding. However, it is clear that tradition has to be modified to a changing world and there are several illustrations of this. In Ali’s first marriage to Fusema, her relatives’ initial request for one year to consider his proposal is narrowed down to a single week because of his study commitments abroad. In his second marriage he insists that Esi accept an engagement ring as well as a wedding ring, although this is traditionally reserved for the first wife. 

This process of modernisation is highlighted in the text through the manner in which Ali and Esi’s love affair progresses by telephone and fax, which signify an increased tempo in their relationship. Their initial encounter is in Ali’s travel agency, and it is from there that he makes his frequent phone calls, often between trips abroad. These telephone calls signpost the changing nature of Ali’s relationships. The unreliability of telecommunications in Africa, especially after heavy rain, provides a useful excuse for Ali not to phone Esi to explain his whereabouts. The telephone serves as an alibi in his marriage to Fusema, as he ensures that he is in the office as often as possible to receive her phone calls during his repeated absences from home. The narrator states his attitude towards these calls: “he always enjoyed taking those late night calls. There are few pleasures left, and surely one of them must be having the chance to prove you are a faithful spouse – especially when you are not” (p.84).
Indeed, part III of *Changes* opens with a telephone dialogue between Ali and Esi, consisting of snatched conversations, in which Ali excuses his absence. The dialogue concludes with a kind of stage direction: "Fade in the end-of-day sounds of the city and its traffic: yes, do fade them in: especially when you are in doubt" (p.137). Such narratorial intervention helps foreshadow the inevitable failure of Ali and Esi’s relationship. At the beginning of part II, two new women characters, Aba and Ama, are introduced briefly and converse together, in a dramatically structured dialogue. Perhaps the latter character is a playful embodiment of the novel’s author. The two women discuss the various reasons for a man’s repeated infidelities, noting the changes over time. The conversation is parodic in nature, the tone exaggerated, as the numerous reasons for men’s infidelity are listed, varying from the more traditional grounds, that of a woman’s beauty and youth, to that of her powerful connections, among whom are “Prime ministers, presidents, general secretaries of free republics, secretary generals” (p.101). It is interesting to note that in more recent times a woman’s attraction may derive from her own powerful position in society since she may occupy “One of the topmost posts” and receive “One of the largest pay packets!” (p.102).

This dialogue is an ironic exposition of male infidelity. Although it traces an advancement, of sorts, in women’s social position, it is nevertheless clear that they continue to be subjects of exploitation. If the description of men’s fickleness is light-hearted in tone, the fact that this small interlude is placed just after Ali has told Fusema that he is taking a second wife and his preparations for this marriage, quickly followed by this event and his desertion of Esi on their wedding night, makes it is clear that the narratorial intent is, in fact, highly critical. The fact that Ali does not even spend his wedding night with Esi foreshadows the disintegration of their relationship and although they remain married she cannot remain unaware of his “womanising activities” (p.165). Esi’s sense of hurt at Ali’s absence on their wedding night is compounded by the fact that she realises that his decision to spend the night with Fusema must mean that the latter is unaware that Ali’s second marriage has in fact taken place, or she would not have expected her husband. Because of this, Esi feels even more betrayed, though she knows that by accepting to be a second wife, she has in a way “legalised” Ali’s treatment of her. Aidoo herself has spoken about how the institution of marriage is exploitative of women:
Throughout history and among all peoples, marriage has made it possible for women to be owned like property, abused and brutalized like serfs, privately corrected and, like children, publicly scolded, overworked, underpaid, and much more thoroughly exploited than the lowest male worker on any payroll.\textsuperscript{75}

Some Western feminists have tended to view the African woman as totally unliberated, possibly due to many of the aspects of traditional African society which are incompatible with a Western perspective, such as polygamy and the African woman’s obligations in a traditional African context.\textsuperscript{76} However, some commentators stress the African woman’s independence and autonomy which was effectively negated with the onset of colonialism.\textsuperscript{77} Aidoo herself voices the conviction that some of the inequality in gender relationships in African society stems from Western influence and customs which have been imported:

Look at this vast continent! Look at its army of women! It is quite ridiculous, really, that people, especially educated African men, operate as though women were not around. This is part of the colonial inheritance, because it wasn’t like that in our societies, at least not in most of them. Although, at every stage, women have not been given that headship position, our societies have not been totally oblivious of the presence and existence of women.\textsuperscript{78}

Perhaps Aidoo’s obvious frustration and anger at the dismissal of African women by African men leads to her rather simplistic appraisal of the “colonial inheritance,” although it is widely recognised that colonialism impacted negatively on local women’s autonomy.\textsuperscript{79}

In \textit{Fureurs}, although polygamy is not such a pressing issue as it is in \textit{Changes}, (Islamic religion does not feature as a factor in this novel),\textsuperscript{80} Emilienne’s husband, Joseph, does enter into a \textit{de facto} relationship in which his partner bears two children. However, Emilienne, in similar vein to Esi, perceives marriage as being based upon the notion of the couple, a romantic ideal for which both she and Joseph are willing to ignore the disapproval of their parents. Emilienne, again evoking Esi’s attitude, believes that one marries an individual, rather than his whole family: “\textit{Je compte bien me marier avec un homme et non avec une famille}”(p.18) [I fully intend to marry a man and not a family]. However, she is forced to compromise this view when both her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law’s two children come to live with her. Although Emilienne, in raising her nephews, is fulfilling a traditional African role, she is in fact following her sister’s advice to always try to appease her in-laws. As I stressed in the introduction to this chapter, parenting roles are not just restricted to the biological mother/father in African society.
However, because of her mother-in-law’s clear bias towards her daughter’s two sons in preference to Emilienne’s daughter, Rékia, the latter not only suffers injustice at her grandmother’s hands, but patriarchal domination within the household is perpetuated.

As in Esi’s second marriage, the breakdown of Emilienne and Joseph’s marriage seems to be the result of Joseph’s inability to commit himself only to her. Emilienne herself, musing on Joseph’s second household is reminded of the explanation of an African sociologist as to why men need three women in their lives in order to be fulfilled, and her reflections, in turn, remind the reader of the complexity of African gender attitudes today:

Il y a l’épouse, qu’il considère comme une partie de lui-même, le reflet de la mère qui rassure, console et veille à son bien-être; la maîtresse, qui joue le rôle de la confidente et de la conseillère, le porte-bonheur; enfin, la petite copine qui lui permet de fantasmer et de s’oublier de temps en temps avant de se retrouver revigoré dans les bras de sa femme. Sans ces trois femmes, dit ce sociologue, l’homme reste un déséquilibré. (p.154)

[There is the wife, whom he considers a part of himself, the mother-image who puts him at ease, comforts and watches over his well-being; the mistress who plays the role of the confidant and adviser, his lucky charm; finally, the girlfriend who allows him to fantasise and to forget himself from time to time before finding himself back, invigorated, in the arms of his wife. Without these three women, this sociologist says, man remains unbalanced].

Emilienne’s musings on her thoughts concerning a man’s sexual needs points to his phallocentric nature. However, it must be stressed that the analysis of this particular set of male practices is not confined to Africa. Calixthe Beyala’s comments are relevant here when she notes the West’s hypocritical attitude towards polygamy where Western men have affairs behind their wives’ backs, although the African male protagonists discussed here behave in just such a manner. Although Beyala’s remark cannot be denied, nevertheless the polygamous husband’s deceit is a major theme in African women’s writing.

What conclusions can be drawn with regard to attitudes towards marriage? Both authors perceive issues of gender as significant in pointing to the double standard which persists in a society that endorses polygamy and tolerates a husband’s infidelities. Both protagonists, incidentally, are left alone at the conclusion of the novels: Emilienne leaves her husband and Esi and Ali agree to separate. Are Aidoo and Rawiri advocating a separatist philosophy? This is unlikely, given some positive representation of marriage in the novels, but both writers would
seem to reject polygamous or de facto relationships. All of the male protagonists in these novels also show confusion about the changing situation with regard to polygamy in their countries. None are portrayed as stereotypical "evil" husbands, but it is evident that they show a lack of constancy towards their partners and a disregard for their feelings.

What coping mechanisms emerge on the part of the female protagonists faced with these varying degrees of marital breakdown? Compromise is especially apparent in the attitudes of Fusema and Opokuya in Changes, although rejection of marriage is the solution advocated by the principal characters in both novels, Esi and Emilienne. An alternative to heterosexual union is broached in Fureurs, when it appears that Emilienne has found happiness in a lesbian relationship, but it is ultimately rejected. Despite this fact, women's close friendships are a source of support and encouragement. This is seen in Fureurs when Emilienne's sister-in-law refuses to spy on her at the behest of her mother, Eyang. Although Emilienne differs over some issues from her sister, Eva, whenever she is in trouble she instinctively finds her way to her house for advice and support. The closeness of this sororial relationship is very similar to that of Esi and Opokuya in Changes. Although such supportive women-centred relationships are clearly advocated by the authors of these novels, nevertheless they do acknowledge that women are often their own worst enemies in the way that they are prepared to tolerate a husband's unreasonable behaviour. For example, Opokuya's women friends clearly believe that she is at fault in her dispute with her husband over use of his official car:

As far as they were concerned, it was Opokuya who was unreasonable or mad. Clearly she didn't know anything. She should listen to the stories of women who paid for cars which their husbands then took over completely. In some cases whisking their girlfriends around town in them. (p.18)

Although these women are critical of such behaviour, their resigned acceptance does not augur well for change.

African women writers are not the only critics of polygamy. Many African male writers sensitive to the female condition have also produced literature which is highly critical of the practice. One such is the Senegalese novelist, Ousmane Sembène, who, in his short story "Ses Trois Jours," describes the situation of Noumbé, the third wife of her husband, Mustapha, who looks forward to her "turn" of living with her husband. Noumbé, ill
from constant childbirth, spends two days waiting for a husband who does not come because he is with his fourth wife, and when he eventually arrives, she is so upset that she breaks the dishes which she has cooked and set out for him and collapses on the floor. Instead of rushing to his wife’s aid, Mustapha walks out, complaining of her jealousy. Despite such fictional accounts, other African commentators extol the virtues of polygamy and make light of wifely rivalries. For example, Filomena Steady, in a relatively early study of various Black African cultures, has commented: “Polygamy...also facilitated the shared mothering of children and guaranteed women some autonomy, personal freedom, and greater mobility than would be possible in a monogamous, nuclear family.”84 One may quibble with Steady’s certainty that polygamy “guarantees” African women this autonomy. It might be more appropriate to see polygamy as creating the opportunity for such autonomy. Certainly commentators in this area do not seem to vouchsafe opinions which are nuanced in any way. Emecheta has echoed the views of Steady, expressing her belief that polygamy can be liberating for a woman, that it creates more freedom for her, especially if she is educated.85 Another renowned African critic and writer has also criticised Western commentators for attacking polygamy, believing that “[It] is not always oppressive to the woman. It has its economic role in guaranteeing women the autonomy and human dignity they need.”86 Indeed, Ogundipe-Leslie not only takes Western critics to task, but also criticises African writers for being unable “to debunk the myths surrounding polygyny. One serious failure lies in their inability to present polygyny in its serious relation to production instead of as some form of sensational pornography or as an institution deliberately designed to humiliate women.”87

It is undeniable that polygamy is contentious, and cannot be looked at in isolation.88 Ogunyemi, in a recent study of Nigerian literature, has voiced her belief that when a woman becomes a mother, her status as a wife is undervalued due to the strength of the bond that she forms with her child:

Unfortunately, this bond displaces her as a wife, as a persona, in the patriarchal community. Thus, a daughter is considered an extension of her paternal grandmother rather than of her own mother. This attitude encourages man to revere his mother and to love his daughter in a biological connection that excludes his wife, the focus of the male-female struggle.89

The next section of this chapter examines the representation of motherhood and the manner in which the African woman is indeed perceived as marginalised in her relationships.
Motherhood – An Introduction

In African society motherhood is particularly valorised, and has tended to be idealised in literature, especially by male writers, ranging from those in the Negritude tradition, such as Camara Laye in the preface to his novel, *L’Enfant noir*, dedicated to his mother, or Senghor in his famous poem “Femme noire,” right through to contemporary writers such as Soyinka and Ngugi. However, African women writers have been less inclined to be idealistic, especially in the anglophone tradition where the importance of motherhood is questioned in early writing by Flora Nwapa. Her first novel *Efuru* (1966) permits her eponymously named protagonist to find ultimate fulfilment in serving the goddess of the Lake, Uhamiri, so that she is in consequence childless. Nwapa’s novel ends with the question: “She [Uhamiri] had never experienced the joy of motherhood. Why then did the women worship her?” In this way Nwapa undercuts the general assumption that women can only be valued through motherhood. In her subsequent novel, *Idu*, the heroine even chooses to relinquish her life upon the death of her husband, rather than to live and look after her only child. Emecheta’s novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, whose title ironically echoes the ending of Nwapa’s *Efuru*, is perhaps the most telling indictment of how a society’s insistence on valorising motherhood to the exclusion of any other means of fulfilment, can lead to bitterness and impoverishment, both economic and emotional, in an urban African environment. In francophone African women’s writing an idealised notion of motherhood is also subverted, often raising the issue that many women have children to satisfy their husbands, and society in general, rather than for their own self-fulfilment, as seen in Rawiri’s *Fureurs*. An interesting extension to the self-sacrificing mother image is seen in Philomena Bassek’s *La tache de sang* [The Bloodstain] where a woman’s life is threatened through frequent pregnancies. When Mama Ida is in her mid-fifties she becomes pregnant with her eleventh child and her eldest daughter acts to save her life by collaborating with a doctor to cause her to abort, unknown to her mother. When the daughter confesses to her mother what she has done, the latter accepts her explanations and understands her actions. In this way Bassek suggests not only that a new generation of African women is beginning to question the status quo of unquestioning adherence to motherhood, but that this is also endorsed by the older
generation. There is also a tendency in recent francophone African fiction to focus on the experience of mothers who exploit their daughters, one such example being Calixthe Beyala’s novel *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*.

Adoption: An Alternative to Biological Motherhood? The example of *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*

In this, her second novel, Beyala presents yet another alternative to the institution of motherhood and biological mothering: that of adoption. The novel is the story of a young woman, Tanga, who finds herself in a prison cell with a French-Jewish woman, Anna-Claude. Because Tanga is on the point of death, due to the ill treatment she has received in prison, she agrees to confide her life story to Anna-Claude if the latter is willing to “become” herself. Such a request seems to denote a search for a female solidarity which transcends both class and racial boundaries. However, Anna-Claude is herself an outsider, not only because she is Jewish, but also because she is disturbed, to the point of psychosis, living in an imaginary world even before her imprisonment. She is therefore alienated from society and in this respect is in the same situation as Tanga. The latter’s sense of alienation is the culmination of many years of abuse by her parents during which she is raped by her father and forced by her mother to undergo excision and to become a prostitute. When asked by Anna-Claude why she did not leave home when her mother laid a curse upon her, Tanga responds: “Impossible. Dans mon pays, l’enfant naît adulte, responsable de ses parents” (p.66). 

In such circumstances then, it is not surprising that Beyala’s protagonist should recoil from the “institution” of motherhood and instead embrace the actual mothering process itself. She chooses to adopt, unofficially, a disabled young street boy named Mala. Indeed, her mothering role appears to extend to all the homeless, disadvantaged youth who make a living as best they can in the urban slums: “J’aimerais que s’ébauche pour moi une nouvelle vie où j’offrirais la mère à un enfant qui en aurait besoin, d’autres enfants encore, l’homme, la
maison, le chien, la pie au bout du pré" (p.99) [I'd like the outlines of a new life to be sketched for me in which I'd offer to be a mother to the child who needs one – to other children as well – the man, the house, the dog, the magpie at the end of the meadow, p.64]. The standard, stereotypically described, rather Western vision of family life, which is a refrain in the novel, is also desired by the prostitute character, Irène, in Beyala's first novel, *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*. Tanga's desire to mother is evident when she is abducted by a vagrant who takes on the fatherly role to the homeless children. A Fagin-type character, he provides these children with much needed shelter and never abuses them, but they are forced to steal for him in order to earn their keep. His is an exploitative role, whereas Tanga provides more of a nurturing role towards these abandoned children.

Tanga's renunciation of biological motherhood is not a new phenomenon in her family. Her grandmother, who was repeatedly raped, rejects Tanga's mother when she gives birth to her as a result of this experience and vows never to have another child. Tanga's mother also tries to escape being brutalised by men by forcing palmnuts into her vagina, but her husband, Tanga's father, nevertheless verbally and physically abuses her. In order to renounce motherhood, Tanga must also renounce prostitution and in order to do so, she fills her vagina with a lump of clay, reminiscent of her mother's action with the palmnuts, again underlining the insidiousness of women's oppression in connection with their own bodies.

Certainly, although Tanga has rejected biological motherhood, she does find fulfilment in the foster-mothering role. The relationship she develops with her foster-son is an interesting one. It is interdependent, unlike the normal mothering role where the child is dependent upon the mother. Tanga is as much in need of Mala's company as he is of hers. He seems to provide her with access to a childhood denied her as they play together. Theirs is also a very physical relationship as is evident in the way that she breastfeeds him:

> "Il disait: 'I'm hungry, Ma.' I'd take out one breast. He'd suckle. He'd fall asleep. In my happiness, I'd worry about his, p.130]. However, although this relationship is physical, it is not sexual. The reference to the child's hunger not only refers to a physical
hunger, where poverty entails a daily search for food, but an emotional hunger, denied this child when he was abandoned by his mother. This new-found mothering role is destined for failure as Mala dies and Tanga is committed to prison. However, Tanga’s motherly love finds another, final, outlet. Anna-Claude, with whom she shares the prison cell and to whom she confides her story, is also in need of succour. Just as Tanga had cared for the street children and Mala, so too she attempts to comfort Anna-Claude, despite the fact that she is in a weak and extremely abject state herself:

Tanga trace sur son cou et son flanc des sillons de tendresse. Elle lui dit de ne pas pleurer, qu’elles venaient de connaître le cauchemar mais que le réel était l’êtreinte. Elle lui dit qu’elles frotteront leur désespoir et que d’elles jaillira le plus maternel des amours. (p.72)

[Tanga traces grooves of tenderness on her neck and her loins. She tells her not to cry, that they have only just become acquainted with the nightmare, but that the embrace is the reality. She tells her that they will stroke their despair and that the most maternal of all love will gush forth from them, p.45].

The narrator of Beyala’s novel would seem to be acknowledging that where biological motherhood has failed, the adoptive mothering process may be just as capable, if not more so, of producing a nurturing, caring and mutually reinforcing love, where human touch and warmth may be the only solace.

Challenging the Conventional Idea of Motherhood in Changes; Fureurs et cris de femmes; The Joys of Motherhood; One is Enough

In Changes the conventional view of motherhood is also challenged in the attitude of the main protagonist. Esi’s ambivalence is seen both in her manner towards her daughter and in her decision not to bear any more children. This is particularly unusual in a context where motherhood is valorised and idealised in African fiction written by men. After the birth of Esi’s daughter she refuses to have any more children, an attitude quite exceptional, especially as she has not given birth to a son. In this respect the author touches on sensitive social ground. It is clearly Esi’s decision to have only one child, in opposition to her husband, Oko, who disapproves of her contraceptive measures, and wants one more, a boy if possible.
Neither she nor her husband show enough concern for their existing daughter to cease their constant rowing and once they are separated, the daughter spends nearly all her time with Oko’s parents. Although Esi feels somewhat rejected because her daughter is obviously happy surrounded by other children, at the same time she is pleased to be free of her duties “in connection with her role as a mother, a wife and a home-maker”(p.138). She evidently values her autonomy more, as she feels only “a little bad”(p.138) about the situation. It is not that Esi has no motherly feelings: “her own mothering instincts revolted at the mere thought”(p.142) of not visiting her daughter to avoid seeing her mother-in-law. However, her visits are not frequent: “She would only make things worse for herself if she cut even her occasional visits”(p.142).

Although Esi seems more fulfilled in her relationship with Ali, her attitude towards motherhood does not change. It is nevertheless evident that he would like a family: “There was also this talk of having children. Even if she had been keen on the idea – and God knows she was not – she now wondered how the children were going to be made when she and Ali did not seem to get together often enough to make even one child”(p.139). Esi’s reluctance to have a child is due to other reasons than his increasing absences, and explains her general ambivalence towards motherhood. Other female protagonists in the novel are shown to have more conventional attitudes towards motherhood, Esi being considered “unnatural” by both her own family and her husband’s. Opokuya is obviously more fulfilled in her role as mother, and like Esi she assumes the responsibility of deciding the number of children she will have, but she is obviously exhausted by coping with a demanding job, her children and an uncooperative husband.

The mention of contraception, rarely a topic in African literature, allows Aidoo to introduce the question of a woman’s right to choose whether or not to bear children. In “traditional” society the main source of a woman’s status and power was her ability to provide heirs, preferably sons, so in this respect Esi has failed in her traditional female role. By introducing the topic of contraception, Aidoo not only raises its centrality in connection with women’s emancipation, but links it to a neo-colonialist discourse, whereby Africa continues to be dominated by the West. An example of this is Opokuya’s belief that Africans tend to be treated as guinea pigs for breakthroughs in Western medicine. She cites, as an example, the way packets of the
contraceptive pill are always available from the West, and mentions that the reason for this is the West’s obsession with Africa’s growing population, indicated in the available of contraceptives from the West in however remote a clinic. Opokuya implies that the Ghanaian government is at fault to some extent for behaving like “professional beggars”(p.14), ready to accept whatever contribution the West may wish to offer: “Under such circumstances, how does the beggar tell the giver to go and stuff his dangerous and experimental pills, capsules and injections? [...] And they call their murderous programmes such beautiful names: “family planning” and “mother health”... all to cover up...”(p.15). Such contraceptive programmes are likely to be seen as offensive by a culture, which traditionally valorises large families.

Opokuya also makes a veiled criticism of the West’s conception of the African woman as supposedly fat: “You and I know that these days the only fat people in the world are poor uneducated women in the so-called Third World and unhappy sex-starved women in the more affluent societies who are supposed to eat for consolation”(p.36). That Opokuya is obviously joking does not detract from her criticism of the general tendency to stereotype, which does not just operate in the one direction, the more usual biased gaze of the West towards the Third World, but that African women are also guilty of stereotyping Western women. Neither category is flattering, the Western woman seeing the African woman as uneducated and the African woman seeing the Western woman as unfulfilled sexually. Perhaps Aidoo is commenting on, and making a stand against, a universal tendency to categorise the “other.”

In *Fureurs* the ideology surrounding childbirth is explored through the experience of Emilienne. Its consequences are evident in the detailed evocation of her premonition of a miscarriage in the opening pages. Unlike Esi, Emilienne is desperate to conceive. This passage highlights Emilienne’s pain and anger:

*Le foetus se resorbe presque toujours après une quinzaine de jours d’espoir dément, pendant lesquels elle se retranche dans un mutisme exacerbé par une humeur massacrante. Tous ses sens se mettent alors à l'écoute de cette partie de son corps qui, comme une horloge bien réglée, annonce avec précision l'heure fatale du rejet du corps étranger.*

[...] Accablée, dénigrée et vomie par les murs et objets de sa chambre, témoins de son échec sentimental et du délabrement de son corps, elle a le sentiment de ne plus s'appartenir et plus encore de sortir d'un autre monde. (pp.9-10)
[The foetus almost always becomes reabsorbed after a fortnight’s insane hope, during which she takes refuge in a silence intensified by a foul temper. At that time all her senses are concentrated on that part of her body, which, like a well regulated clock, announces with precision the inevitable moment of the rejection of the foreign body.

...Overwhelmed, denigrated, and abhorred by the walls and objects of her room, witnesses to her failure in love and her body’s disintegration, she feels as if she no longer belongs to herself and, what is more, that she comes from another world].

This citation evokes with clarity Emilienne’s abject state after repeated miscarriages. The depiction of her hope of not miscarrying on this occasion as “insane” underlines her fragile psychological condition. This may indicate that Emilienne’s state of mind is a determining factor in her inability to have another child, as is also suggested in the term “humeur massacrange” [foul temper], while at the same time it hints at the mental breakdown which Emilienne will suffer. It is also clear that the whole process, for Emilienne, has taken on an almost mechanical inevitability hence the metaphor of the well-regulated clock, designating her body, which serves to underline her fatalistic attitude. Moreover, such a comparison suggests the way a woman’s body is often regarded in terms of its functionality, especially with regard to childbirth. Emilienne’s image of the aborted foetus as a “foreign body,” and her emphasis on the physical aspects of what is happening to her own body, indicate her inability to cope on an emotional level.

If Emilienne perceives her body as mechanical in the first paragraph, she sees the walls and objects in her bedroom as having a human dimension in the second, for they are perceived as judging her and finding her wanting. Of course her perceptions could be viewed as manifestations of her own guilty feelings for she considers herself a failure in not producing a male child. Her feelings of “no longer belonging to herself” and sense of “coming from another world” can be explained on one level by the physical and emotional turmoil she is undergoing, but at a deeper, psychological level, it could be argued that her constant attempts to “produce” or “manufacture” a child for the purpose of saving her marriage, and her continual vision of herself in terms of functionality, have robbed her of identity, not only as a woman, but as a human being.
Emilienne seems in fact to be experiencing a form of fragmentation of identity. Still recovering from a miscarriage, she examines herself in the mirror: “Devant la glace [...] qu’elle affronte avec dépit, elle triture la chair ramollie et adipeuse des bras, du ventre et des cuisses. Elle ne peut cependant soutenir longtemps la vue d’une autre elle-même, à laquelle elle ne s’identifie pas” (p.12) [In front of the mirror...that she faces with bitterness, she squeezes the soft and fleshy skin of her arms, stomach and thighs. However she cannot bear for long the sight of another self with whom she does not identify]. Calixthe Beyala deals with a similar sense of fragmentation in C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée where the main protagonist, Ateba, cannot bear the sight of herself in the mirror: “[Elle] fu[it] ses reflets dans la glace, prisonnière d’un vertige de pensées qu’elle ne peut maîtriser” (p.148) [She shuns her reflection in the mirror, prisoner of a turmoil of thoughts that she cannot control]. Moreover, as in the case of Emilienne, she is unable to identify with her own image: “Celle dans le miroir lui est étrangère...Elle est elle sans être elle” (p.149) [The person in the mirror is a stranger to her...It is herself but not herself, ]. But whereas Ateba’s fragmentation stems from a lack of emotional and intellectual outlets, Emilienne’s results from low self-esteem caused by the constant pressure of failing to produce children. Later that day, when her miscarriage is a certainty, Emilienne can barely detect her image in the mirror: “A-t-elle encore un corps, une image, un reflet?” (p.26) [Does she still have a body, an image, a reflection?] Her very identity as a woman has become dependent upon her biological function to reproduce, without which she feels worthless, a condition symbolised by her perception of herself as a void.

It is clear that Emilienne’s main reason for desperately wanting to have another child is to “reconquérir son mari qui lui échappe” (p.10) [reconquer her husband who is slipping away from her]. She feels that the only way to save her marriage is to give him “un garçon qui lui ressemble” (p.25) [a boy who looks like him]. In this way the narrator foregrounds issues of gender ideology prevalent in African society, where girls are not as highly valued as boys. The African-American critic, Barbara Christian, has commented on the ambivalent status given to women in societies where daughters are not as valued as sons because their main social role is to become mothers. In Fureurs, Emilienne’s daughter, Rékia, is abducted and later her body is recovered. An ongoing police investigation fails to locate the murderer, and the loss of their daughter pulls Emilienne and Joseph further apart. Rawiri’s treatment of this abduction and
murder is interesting in that it introduces a minor sub-plot whose significance she fails to resolve. As D’Almeida points out: “Through the novel’s narrative, the neutralization of the girl is fully realized in Rékia’s actual death.” However, one could argue that it is not just a question of Rékia’s being written out of the plot, but that the ambiguous, unresolved events surrounding her murder serve, in the narrative, to reflect the low esteem in which daughters are generally held in African society, just as the child’s ignominious death symbolises the erasure of young womanhood. Moreover, subsequent to Joseph’s bringing Rékia’s dead body home, Dominique turns up at the house, already dressed in black, as if aware of Rékia’s death. Has Joseph phoned her from the police station, surely an inconceivable action when Rékia’s own mother is unaware of her death, or is the reader supposed to assume that she was in some way involved in Rékia’s death? Is Rawiri, in the very structure of her novel, underlining the subordinate role of African daughters, or is she, in her rather perfunctory approach, perhaps unintentionally endorsing this cultural phenomenon? It is probable that the sub-plot is simply one of narrative convenience, since it paves the way for the heroine, Emilienne, to reassess her relationship with her daughter and her inadequacy as a mother.

The episode of Rékia’s death, although barely accounted for in the novel itself, is thus of central importance, especially for Emilienne, who has recurrent nightmares in which masked men snatch her baby away from her and kill it. At one level these nightmares may be as a result of her repeated miscarriages, but they may also allude to Rékia’s abduction and murder. As these nightmarish figures are masked, they have no identity which might be interpreted as a generic symbolic negation of a patriarchal society’s treatment of its “daughters.”

To further emphasise the higher status given to sons in the Gabonese society described, when Joseph later confesses the existence of his two children by his mistress, it is evident that it is his son of whom he is proud:

*Le garçon que j’attendais depuis longtemps était enfin arrivé. Dans quelques années il allait devenir mon meilleur ami, mon grand complice. Cet événement dans ma vie me transforma complètement, me jeta de nouveau dans les bras de la femme qui avait réussi à me donner ce garçon que j’avais espéré avoir avec toi.* (p.134)

[The boy that I had been waiting for so long had at last arrived. In a few years he was going to become my best friend, my great accomplice. This event in my life transformed me completely,
threw me again into the arms of the woman who had succeeded in giving me this boy that I had hoped to have with you].

The gender ideology operating within African families, clearly seen here, is further complemented by Emilienne’s lack of appreciation of her daughter. She realises that although Rékia has helped to compensate for her husband’s absences, nevertheless she has sometimes wished that her daughter were a boy. She also perceives that her relationship with her husband has taken precedence over that with her daughter and in fact hints that no child can in any way substitute for a husband: “pour elle, il était utopique de croire que la naissance d’un enfant puisse se substituer à l’amour et à la présence d’un homme” (p.32) [for her, it was utopic to believe that the birth of a child could be a substitute for love and the presence of a man]. It is clear here that Emilienne’s focus in life and sentimental fulfilment reside in her relationship with her husband, rather than that with her child. In fact, a more affectively complex process is at work, for the extent of her love for her daughter is actually dependent upon the love she receives from her husband: “Pour elle [Emilienne], et bien qu’elle ne le réalisât pas tout de suite, l’intensité de l’amour qu’elle éprouvait pour son enfant dépendait de celle qu’elle recevait du père” (p.32) [For her [Emilienne], and although she did not realise it straightaway, the intensity of the love that she felt for her child depended on the love that she received from the father].

Neither Joseph nor Emilienne conform to African gender role expectations of parenting. The former, unlike his friends, is seen as a caring and doting father, and his love for his baby daughter is apparent. He is even present at his daughter’s birth and often gives her a bottle, as he is unable to persuade Emilienne to breastfeed. Emilienne fears that, if she is to have several other children, her figure will suffer. Emilienne thus rejects the role that she would typically be expected to embrace. This negation of the centrality of a woman’s love for her children is not a common theme in African literature, although as we have seen, the work of Calixthe Beyala is an exception. Further aspects of this phenomenon will be explored in the next two chapters.

Emilienne also exhibits ambivalence towards motherhood when she considers it as a means of empowerment. After her visit to Dr Pascal, a famous gynaecologist, she feels a renewed hope
that she may become pregnant, but then, pondering on the whole question of advances in Western medicine, she muses that eventually it may be possible for men to become pregnant and give birth, which would “ravir à la femme son unique pouvoir” (p.111) [rob a woman of her only power]. Admittedly these thoughts are set in the context of women’s lack of power in business and politics, but nevertheless, it is another example of Emilienne’s calculating view of motherhood and is perhaps unavoidable in a society that sets such store on established notions and value of motherhood.

Throughout the novel, Emilienne’s attempts to have a child are primarily a result of familial and societal pressure, and she herself is unwilling to believe that Joseph values her more as a mother than as a wife. Both her own family and Joseph’s mother are relentless in their criticism of her failure to conceive. Her mother-in-law, Eyang, tells her that she should use the money she spends on dogs and cats to cure her “ventre malade” (p.59) [sick womb] and stresses that she should seek medical aid. Her mother-in-law clearly views her as a freak since she does not want to devote her life to raising children. However, Emilienne is obsessed with the desire to conceive and will go to extreme lengths; not only does she visit her doctor and a gynaecologist but she also visits a sorcerer and a magnetiser. Emilienne’s willingness to subscribe to what may be considered an unorthodox example of Western medicine points to what extent African women may be prepared to endorse such practices if it will help them achieve “traditional” needs, like motherhood.

The sociological ramifications of the importance of children in an African marriage are underlined in the marital contract of Joseph and Emilienne, which contains a clause stipulating that its durability is dependent upon her ability to provide heirs (p.98). According to Coquery-Vidrovitch, in her historical study of African women in rural societies, “the woman was mainly expected to be a good childbearer.” In fact, in some parts of Africa, it was traditionally the actual act of procreation which legalised a union, rather than the wedding ceremony itself. Coquery-Vidrovitch also mentions that in Ogooué-Maritime, in nineteenth century Gabon, a marriage ceremony did not take place until the prospective bride showed proof of her fertility and her “high quality” by becoming pregnant. If the child were a boy, the prospective husband’s family took him into its care. It was not until a girl was born that the marriage was ratified and
the dowry paid. Coquery-Vidrovitch deduces from this that although the birth of a girl was not glorified to the extent of that of a boy, it was not dishonourable and guaranteed a source of labour.104

Rawiri’s reader may be surprised that a heroine who has already borne one child may be considered abnormal, but this is apparent in Emilienne’s case. As her sister reminds her, her dead daughter hardly counts as in a few years people will have forgotten that she has been a mother like all normal women. This remark that people will have forgotten her earlier child emphasises the importance given in African society to conformity to standard marital expectations.105 It is not only necessary to have children, but to be seen to be doing so. Note that the sister also tells Emilienne: “Tu dois savoir que tu ne seras jamais une femme à part entière tant que tu n’auras pas des enfants que tu élèveras et que ton entourage verra grandir” (p.89).106 [You must know that you will never be a complete woman as long as you do not have children to bring up and that the people round you will see growing]. Thus, according to the sister, children are not only for personal fulfilment, but are indispensable in order to legitimise social status. Emilienne’s mother endorses the daughter’s argument to the extent that she would not blame her son-in-law if he decided to take another wife in order to have children. According to the father, women can only inspire respect from others and be fulfilled in themselves when they succeed in balancing their professional life and their life as a mother and as a wife.

In Emilienne’s response to her family’s arguments – the economic hardship children cause in the poorer sections of society, the plight of young women who are forced to prostitute themselves in order to feed their children, and the rise in infant mortality – Rawiri appears to be attempting to widen the debate about the importance of children to African society into its disadvantageous effects in an economy unable to deal with population growth. Additionally, such effects are most telling on the already overworked African female who is ever willing to sacrifice herself for her children: “Les sourires n’ont pas seulement disparu des visages des femmes stériles; de nombreuses mères ne savent plus rire” (p.91) [The smiles have not just disappeared from the faces of sterile women; numerous mothers no longer know how to laugh].
Unfortunately Emilienne’s arguments resonate in the context of the novel as mere platitudes, perhaps indicating the narrator’s attempt to point to the complexity of such issues which are only now beginning to be questioned by African writers.

Just as in *Changes* Aidoo expands her discussion of contraception into the political domain, so too, does Rawiri in connection with her discussion of sterility. The narrator recalls the Negritude tradition in also associating her protagonist with Mother Africa. However, in *Fureurs* the narrative centres not on fertility, but on barrenness. Hearing on the radio of the assassination of President Sankara in Burkina Faso, Emilienne laments Africa’s misfortune and fears for its future, “Le ventre de l’Afrique deviendra bientôt aussi stérile que le mien” (p.124) [Africa’s womb will soon become as sterile as mine]. This image of Africa is one of harsh reality rather than metaphysical beauty. Africa is seen as “incapable de se gouverner, victime des calamités naturelles et attaquée de l’extérieur par la crise économique et financière” (p.124) [incapable of governing itself, victim of natural calamities and attacked from the outside by the economic and financial crisis]. From a literary and ideological perspective, Rawiri’s rereading of one of Africa’s literary icons could be considered subversive in her refusal to conform to traditionally inspired glorifications of African motherhood. On a more symbolic level, if Rawiri identifies her heroine with Mother Africa, just as Emilienne’s change of heart results in her pregnancy (her “womb problem” having been considered psychosomatic by her doctor), there may be an optimistic suggestion at the novel’s end for a more hopeful future with regard to her country’s wider economic and political issues.

Florence Stratton devotes a whole chapter entitled “The Mother Africa Trope,” in her recent study, to the tendency of male African writers to embody their country in the figure of a woman. She traces two major strands, the “pot of culture” strand which, “following the model provided by Leopold Sédar Senghor, analogizes woman to the heritage of African values, an unchanging African essence,” and “the sweep of history” strand where “woman now serves as an index of the state of the nation” and she proceeds to explore these in relation to various African male writers’ works. She ends her discussion with the implications of the trope for female creativity, believing such a trope operates against the interests of women, excluding them implicitly from authorship and citizenship. As we have seen in Rawiri’s use of this
trope, however, she subverts those characteristics generally associated with it. Rawiri’s vision of Africa as a woman is not fruitful, but sterile. Her protagonist is the incorporation of a living woman and fits into neither of the two categories discussed by Stratton, the young nubile eroticised figure, or the earthy Mother figure. Moreover, she is the construction of a woman writer whose primary aim is not only to underline how motherhood is an essentially physical and emotional experience endured or enjoyed by real living women, but also to point to the pressures women are subjected to in order to conform to society’s expectations of them. In this sense, a vision of Africa beset upon by marauders is symbolic of a female character who is torn by the many competing demands made upon her. In allying her protagonist to the fate of an African country Rawiri complies with Stratton’s definition of the “sweep of history” strand, Emilienne’s barren body compared to the abject state of a nation. However, in so doing she criticises the glorifying tendencies of male writers in their quest for a national vision and points instead to the realities of an unnamed country in post-colonial Africa set upon by its neighbours and in need of succour and renewal.

The novel concludes with the death of Emilienne’s sister after giving birth to a stillborn child. To underscore this tragedy, Eva contemplated an abortion in the early stages of her pregnancy, which would obviously have saved her life, but was encouraged by Emilienne not to do so. Because of this Emilienne feels she has a special responsibility to Eva’s expected child, that of a substitute mother. In a sense, then, Emilienne’s expectation of a child, the one conceived by her sister, is once more denied her. The narrator describes Eva’s body as a coffin for her own dead child, an image visualised by Emilienne herself when she is confronted with her murdered daughter’s dead body. She vows that henceforth her womb would serve as a tomb, not only for her dead daughter, but for all the children she has lost. In Fureurs, then, the highlighting of a woman’s barrenness with images of death and entombment reinforces the strength of emotion suffered by women faced with the prospect of unfulfilled motherhood, and at the same time points to the futility of such emotional investment in future progeny which cannot be guaranteed.

Since, at the end of Rawiri’s novel Emilienne discovers that she is finally pregnant, it is pertinent to ask what bearing this feature has on the ideology concerning motherhood as
delineated in this novel? Could such an endorsement of motherhood be seen as reaffirming the status quo as Emilienne finally conforms to her society's expectations? Although this reading of the novel seems to be highly probable, nevertheless Emilienne has finally decided to renounce her husband and live as a single mother. The questionable reasons underlying her desire for a child, that of keeping her husband, are, then, no longer relevant. Although Emilienne is finally endorsing motherhood, it is motherhood on her own terms.\textsuperscript{111}

I have already alluded to Rich's distinction between the institution of motherhood and the process of mothering itself. This distinction is important and has informed much of the focus of this chapter, for while the institution is criticised for its disempowerment of women, the process is only endorsed when it is a matter of personal choice. Obioma Nnaemeka has recently stressed the different approach taken between Western and African writers on this issue.\textsuperscript{112} She describes the way in which the former have shifted from their earlier strident opposition to motherhood, to an expression of its affirmative aspects, although she believes they still tend to yoke motherhood to victimhood. Of the latter, she says, "African women writers attempt most of the time to delink motherhood and victimhood in the way they separate wifehood and motherhood."\textsuperscript{113} Nnaemeka cites as examples Aissatou and Adaku, who reject wifehood, but not motherhood. Nnaemeka argues, however, that Western feminists, who tend to conflate the pains of womanhood with those of motherhood, misread works such as these. Nnaemeka states: "[t]he arguments that are made for motherhood in the African texts are based not on motherhood as a patriarchal institution but motherhood as an experience."\textsuperscript{114} It is reasonable to suggest, however, that no valid discussion can take place on this subject without a consideration of both of these aspects, the ideology and the practice. Indeed, the protagonists mentioned above by Nnaemeka, Aissatou in *So Long A Letter* and Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who reject wifehood, but not motherhood, are not typical in the literature published by African women, one notable exception being Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, which is briefly discussed below.\textsuperscript{115} Indeed, the two principal protagonists in the novels mentioned by Nnaemeka do not reject wifehood. In Bâ's *So Long a Letter* Ramatoulaye does not reject wifehood, her husband rejects her, and it is only with his death that she is able to gain some sort of perspective over the choice she has made to stay with him. Similarly, in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, the principal protagonist, Nnu Ego, is rejected by her first husband and, even though she is not well treated by
her second husband, Nnaife, she remains with him and consequently suffers the pains of wifehood as well as those of motherhood.

No study on the subject of motherhood in African literature would be complete without reference to Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*. It has received perhaps more critical attention than any other novel by an African woman writer. Emecheta explores all aspects of motherhood in this novel, both the institution and the practice. Her heroine, Nnu Ego, is the daughter of a famous chief in her village, Agbadi, and his mistress, Ona. Nnu Ego vests everything in her desire to conform to her society’s wishes and provide her husband with sons. In her first marriage she is unable to conceive, although she is very happy in her relationship. However, when her husband takes a second wife who soon provides him with a child, Nnu Ego is devastated that he begins to neglect her. Emecheta points to Nnu Ego’s psychological anguish when she is unable to conceive by showing the lengths she is prepared to go to in order to feel fulfilled as a woman. Nnu Ego is so desperate to become a mother that she takes on the mothering task of her co-wife’s child, even to the point of breast feeding him. She gains much psychological and physiological satisfaction in doing this, but such an “unnatural” attachment is doomed to failure and when her husband discovers the truth, she is banished from his household. In this way Emecheta implicitly criticises a society which puts a relentless pressure on a woman to conceive and, when she fails, shows little understanding of her plight. Moreover, once a woman has achieved her aim of giving birth and raising children, the likelihood is that she will remain unfulfilled, as is the case in Nnu Ego’s second marriage to Nnaife Owuluum. She is not at all attracted to her husband, but ignores these feelings in an attempt to become a “true” woman and bear sons. That she achieves this ambition confers status not only on herself, as a mother of sons, but also on her husband. It is when her husband takes a second wife, Adaku, that the author highlights the practice of polygamy and the institution of motherhood, where sons are valorised to the detriment of daughters. Adaku’s decision to leave the marriage is as a consequence of her low status, because she has given birth to only daughters, which is highlighted when the village elders refuse to support her in her complaint against Nnu Ego. Adaku is much happier as a result of her decision; she enjoys her independence and her daughters also benefit as, with the money she earns as a prostitute, they are provided with an education. This is in direct contrast to Nnu Ego, who stays and suffers in
her marriage and who perpetuates a system of feminine oppression and gender hierarchy whereby the sons are educated in preference to the daughters.

There are signs, however, that Nnu Ego does achieve some degree of self-awareness, in her rhetorical question: “God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody’s appendage?” Such a plea underlines Nnu Ego’s propensity for self-effacement until this time and one wonders just how plausible are the stirrings of a feminist consciousness in a character who has not only been denied, but has also denied herself, any means of personal fulfilment. When Nnu Ego dies unlamented on the side of the road, her two eldest sons, who are working abroad, erect a shrine in memory of their mother, where all the women can come to pray and ask her to endow them with children, but Nnu Ego’s spirit ignores their pleas. In this way Emecheta seems to point to the fact that her protagonist’s outburst is not just a moment of frustration, but a realisation that she has neglected herself in trying to fulfil her society’s cultural expectations. It would seem that Emecheta’s protagonist fulfils Barbara Christian’s contention that because “women are reduced to the function of mother, which often results in their loss of a sense of self, the gift of seeing the world from that angle is lost to them and their communities.”

In direct contrast to the unassertive and neglected Nnu Ego is the depiction of Amaka, the heroine of Flora Nwapa’s novel One is Enough. As is so often the case in these marriages, Amaka’s inability to conceive a child in the first six years of her marriage causes her husband to take a second wife, a woman who has already borne him two sons in secret. Amaka decides to leave her husband and begin a new life in Lagos, working as a business woman. In order to gain lucrative contracts, Amaka prostitutes herself with various clients until she becomes pregnant by an Irish Catholic priest. She is delighted with her pregnancy, reassuring Father McIaid that she is not looking for his support:

Do you know what it is for me to get pregnant? I would have gone to a beggar in the street if he could make me pregnant. Do you know what it is for gynaecologists to declare you barren, and years after this to find you are pregnant? So I shall carry my pregnancy with pride. (p.104)

Amaka’s ability to be both a successful career woman, owning great personal wealth which she freely dispenses, and a mother, is evidently an unusual occurrence, as remarked upon by her
mother: “You either had children or you had wealth. Her own daughter had disproved this belief” (p. 116-17). Despite Father Mclaid’s wish to marry Amaka and father the twins she gives birth to, she decides to live a life as a single mother where she is free to make her own decisions:

I don’t want to be a wife any more, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. There is something in that word that does not suit me. As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me. (p. 127)

Amaka completely rejects wifehood, likening it to imprisonment. However, the ending of Nwapa’s novel is ambiguous in this respect for it appears that Amaka has undergone a complete change of heart, bowing to her mother’s insistence that she marry Father Mclaid. She is in fact only prevented from doing so by his decision to return to the priesthood. The circumstances surrounding this decision are contrived: he is involved in a car accident and believes himself to have been saved by divine intervention. In this way Amaka is able to remain a single mother, but not before Nwapa’s quite strident feminist message, amounting to a rejection of wifehood, is severely undercut by the way in which she clumsily manipulates the plot.
Conclusion

A close study of Aidoo’s *Changes* and Rawiri’s *Fureurs*, as well as a consideration of Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough* points to some of the conflicts facing African women in connection with both marriage and motherhood, especially when they are absorbed in their careers. These conflicts include the difficulty of balancing work and family commitments, the impossibility of reconciling romantic love with a marital status which includes polygamous and *de facto* relationships, and the pressures of providing babies on demand when unable, or unwilling, to conceive and thereby conform to patriarchal expectations. However, the authors do not simply stress hardship and disadvantages, they also indicate locations of resistance in their advocacy of major changes in lifestyle. Indeed, the protagonists of both *Changes* and *Fureurs* choose a single lifestyle rather than countenance further suffering, and reject the victim status so often allotted to women by African male writers.

Boyce Davies has commented on the inequities suffered by African women and cites, among other inequities, their lack of choice in marriage and the oppression they are subjected to should they be unable to conceive.119 These features have formed much of the focus of this chapter, although Davies’ reference to African women’s lack of choice in marriage is likely to refer to the practice of not consulting women in the selection of a future husband. This is often a literary theme and, although it is not directly relevant to the novels discussed, the women described are certainly shown as circumscribed by their choices *within* marriage. Davies also refers to Ogundipe-Leslie’s “African Women, Culture and Another Development” in which she lists six burdens borne by African women, the last of which is “herself”, which Davies comments is the most important.120 Clearly, there can be no progress without a belief in one’s own potential, and both Aidoo’s and Rawiri’s heroines, in spite of the fact that they each experience some form of self-imposed oppression, nevertheless ultimately aspire to a belief in themselves. Moreover, Aidoo introduces an interesting gender reversal in *Changes* where her male protagonist is “feminised” and her female protagonist is “masculinised.” Similarly, Rawiri reverses the gender parenting roles of Joseph and Emilienne in connection with their daughter, since the husband is the nurturer and the wife is the disinterested partner. This could be read as the authors’ attempts to point the way forward beyond male/female, masculine/feminine
dichotomies, which are often essentialising, to new concepts of gender identity which are less hierarchical and based on more flexible paradigms.

In the same criticism Boyce Davies lists a summary of what she believes are the key factors of African feminism, two of which are particularly relevant to our discussion. Firstly, African feminism "respects African woman's status as mother but questions obligatory motherhood and the traditional favoring of sons." This form of compulsory mothering and gender hierarchy has formed a major focus of this study and I have attempted to show how Aidoo and Rawiri have raised these issues in their work and have offered alternative constructs of womanhood with which African women can identify. Secondly, Davies has stated that she believes that African feminism endorses polygamy:

[I]t sees utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygamy with respect to child care and the sharing of household responsibility, traditions which are compatible with modern women's lives and the problems of childcare but which were distorted with colonialism and continue to be distorted in the colonial environment.

This second point is obviously more contentious, and has been challenged by d'Almeida concerning the positive aspects of polygamy. She maintains that African women writers, whatever their public comments, depict polygamy in a negative manner. Certainly many African women writers, including those referred to in this chapter, illustrate this in works of fiction.

Both Aidoo and Rawiri have transformed traditional representations of womanhood, both in connection with marriage and motherhood. Although they may associate their female protagonists with "Mother Africa," their aim is to undermine the glorifying tendency shown by African male writers in their work. Just as Rawiri identifies Emilienne with a sterile African country, so too does Aidoo associate Esi, in a very subtle manner, with African nationhood. She links Esi's fate to that of her country when the narrator compares Esi's confusion to that of her country, lamenting that "all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in and the country now was in"(p.114). Such confusion is due to the alienating effects of Western education, whose value Esi appears to be questioning both on an individual and on a national level. Moreover, Esi realises that answers to questions such as these are
unlikely to be solved on a personal level: "Hopefully a whole people would soon have answers for them" (p.115).

In this way both authors have widened what appears to be a "domestic," personal exposition of the lives of their women protagonists and their families, into a more public arena. The general atmosphere evoked in Rawiri's novel is one of disintegration and corruption. The images of disintegration in Emilienne's body when she is miscarrying are metonymic of society's institutions: corruption in the workplace (both Emilienne's and Joseph's); political corruption, (the buying of government contracts); the autocratic nature of government (as witnessed in public executions) and social malaise (as witnessed in increased crime – symbolised in Rékia's murder). Perhaps Rawiri is underlining the disquiet that the post-independent African nation state which she describes is experiencing, which finds its expression in the despair of Emilienne, who, at one point in the novel, is driven to anorexia nervosa and a nervous breakdown.

Aidoo's protagonist also undergoes extreme despondency, is the target of marital rape and neglect and gender discrimination at work, but Esi, like Emilienne, finds the strength of character to deal with her situation. Aidoo also shows similar concerns for political issues in her novel, including First and Third World relationships, particularly with regard to international aid, and the effects of a Western education, although her treatment of these issues is at times satiric and light-hearted, rather than didactic, in tone.125 Aidoo also depicts the inequities which exist in post-independent African societies. In the following quotation she clearly points to the privileged status of her characters, compared to the majority of the poorer members of their society:

The Hotel Twentieth Century was blazing with light, consuming enough electricity to light up the whole of the nearby fishing district. But the fishing villages did not have electricity. In fact, all that the fishing community knew of that facility were the huge pylons that stood in their vegetable patches, and the massive cables passing over the roofs of their homes as these bore the electricity to the more deserving members of society. Like users of hotel lobbies. Like Mrs Esi Sekyi and her friend, Mrs Opokuya Dakwa. (p.43)
Aidoo not only alludes to the current neocolonial situation, but looks back to the historical event of the colonising process itself, satirised in the following scathing account:

In time, quite a sizeable group of Englishmen had come bringing their women with them. They had lived close to one another so that they would be well-placed to fight those natives with guns, the mosquitoes with alcohol, and general boredom with women. Of course, they always could and they often did import both alcohol and women from 'home.' But then, there had also been more than adequate local supplies of both. So in the end they banned the local liquor to force the natives to buy expensive English gin and Scottish whisky, and then proceeded to take over the local women. (p. 16)

In this extract the narrator is writing back, as it were, to the Metropolitan centre and giving an African's version of these events and, at the same time, emphasising the unhappy fate of such African women, subject to exploitation. Aidoo does not deal at length with such issues in this novel, but is able to make her point economically and effectively.

Clearly, both Rawiri and Aidoo are concerned with wider political issues in their respective countries, but this is not separated from their desire to accentuate the plight of African womanhood, which may of course be inextricably linked. Aidoo has spoken in an interview of the importance to her of her identity as an African. However, this nationalistic fervour of Aidoo's is coupled with a concern with women's position in African societies, as she makes clear in the following statement when she cites the attitude of African men to such issues: "part of the resentment which our brothers feel about any discussion on women is because they feel it diverts from the 'main issues'. On the contrary, I feel the revolutionizing of our continent hinges on the woman question. It might be the catalyst for development."

Notes

1 Although the writers studied in this chapter appear to be of this opinion, not all African women writers would agree, as discussed on pp. 45-46 of this chapter.

2 According to Ogunyemi this situation is changing, with the new Nigerian educated woman "subvert[ing] the system of polygyny by becoming polygamous herself. She lives with her children, away from her husband, or rather, her children's father, who has access to them. With such an arrangement, she has her own space and the advantages of marriage, while escaping co-wifely rivalry and the tedium of keeping house for the man and his numerous relations." African Wo/Man Palava, pp. 82-83.

3 Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch has stated how legally, in traditional or modern terms, "women remain inferior to men on paper," particularly with regard to marriage laws "in the way in which property and inheritance rights are implemented, and even in the choice of a burial site for one's husband. She tells how a '1987 appeals court denied the widow of a renowned Kenyan jurist the right to bury her husband in Nairobi. His Luo family won the case even though culturally he had broken with them. The decree arose from a British legal heritage that


6 Lloyd Brown is one of the earlier critics to note how the heroines described in the work of African women writers are socially circumscribed due to their role as mothers. He further notes that the women he discusses are not anti-motherhood, but rather they question its restrictions. As Brown correctly states, if African women do not comply with their “community’s expectations” they are not regarded as “whole women.” Women Writers in Black Africa (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981) pp. 81, 21.

7 See Buchi Emecheta’s The Bride Price (1976) and Maraire’s Zenzele (1996). The issue of lobola in Zenzele is referred to in Chapter 2 of this thesis, p.92.

8 See for example Bâ’s Une si longue lettre (1986), chapter 18, and Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood (1979).

9 “In most patrilineal customary systems the wife does not inherit land or property, although she is normally granted usage rights over pieces of land which she farms,” Diane Kayongo-Male and Philista Onyango, The Sociology of the African Family (London and New York: Longman, 1984), p.53. Additionally for an African married woman to take a loan “she has to show that she has the consent of her husband, yet married men are not subjected to similar treatment.” In some cases women have more power in connection with property ownership, especially in West Africa. Ibid., p.83.

10 See, for example, Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre (1986), p.16. The Cameroonian novelist, Lydie Dooh Bunya has also spoken in an interview about how, on her grandfather’s death, her mother being the only daughter, her mother’s male cousins had not only sold all her father’s land, but had even dug up the house foundations. As a young girl, Dooh Bunya had arrived home to find a pile of sand on her bed. According to Dooh Bunya such things are not easily forgotten and it is due to such an experience that she now considers herself a feminist. Interview with Assitou Diallo, “Lydie Dooh Bunya auteur de La Brise du jour parle ‘amour’,” Amina 73 juillet 1978, pp.36-37, cited in (http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/AMINAAidiaffi.html).


14 See pp.59-60 of this chapter for a full discussion of Rawiri’s use of this trope.


16 Ibid., p.251. Goody concludes that it is recognition “that an individual is once and for all time a member of the kin group through which he is socially identified as a legitimate member of his community, parents are free to respond to changing constraints of family dynamics and the external system in managing the delegation of rearing roles.” Ibid., p.279.

17 When discussing the titles of the various novels studied I am aware that these may be by the publishers as a marketing device, rather than the authors. This does not detract from any useful discussion they may generate.

18 D’Almeida, Francophone African Women Writers, p.89. D’Almeida suggests that Emilienne’s pain is so overwhelming that she is voiceless.

19 See, for example, Flora Nwapa’s Efuru (1966), Idu (London: Heinemann, 1979) and One is Enough (Enugu: Tana Press, 1981); Buchi Emecheta’s Joys of Motherhood (1979); Ama Ata Aidoo’s Anowa (London: Longman, 1980); Ifeoma Okoye’s Behind the Clouds (London: Longman, 1981); Kakou Oklomin’s Okouossai ou mal de mère
20 According to Mba, in precolonial times in most of Ibo and Ibibio land, Nigeria, the men farmed only yams (subsistence crops) and the women planted the trading crops such as coco-yams, vegetables and cassava. “The yam held more prestige, but the women’s crops were more important.” Mba comments that besides producing food, women also prepared it, giving them “the potential weapon of refusing to cook for the men.” Nina Mba, *Nigerian Women Mobilised: Women’s Political Activity in Southern Nigeria 1900-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), pp.29-30. This situation varied according to the different regions in Africa where sometimes the traditional subsistence agriculture was divided into male and female systems of farming. See Ester Boserup, *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1970), p.16.


24 Emecheta relates this event in her autobiography, *Head Above Water* (1986), p.34.

25 Davies and Savory Fido have addressed this problem in “African Women Writers: Toward a Literary History.” Noting that women writers came to writing generally much later than their male counterparts due to a combination of “the opposition of colonial education, family, and gender policies to women’s engaging in pursuits apart from domestic ones,” they believe that autobiographical writing is particularly difficult as “self-revelation may offend the strong sense of decorum and propriety with respect to the family that suffuses African life,” pp.311, 312. That is not to say that these are the only reasons for the lack of writing by women writers. The attitude of the publishers would also be an important consideration.


28 Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, *Interviews with Writers of the Post-colonial World*, p.95. It should be noted, however, that these facilities are not universally available in Britain either. It appears that Emecheta is thus simplifying the problem somewhat.


30 This is a theme in a number of male texts too. See, for example, Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (London: Heinemann, 1966) and Femi Osofsian’s play “Altine’s Wrath” in *Two One-Act Plays* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1986). Both these texts deal with “bush wives” but there are similarities. In East Africa, see Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* (1966; Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968).

31 Aidoo has commented that she believes “that there never were any witches at all anywhere,” that it was rather lack of an intellectual outlet which led to such accusations and that African women were “the most despised” component of humanity, “To Be an African Woman Writer,” pp.156-57.

32 Calixthe Beyala’s comment regarding romantic love endorse this view. According to Beyala, “En Afrique, être en sécurité avec un homme est préférable qu’être amoureuse d’un homme, car un homme vous fera forcément souffrir.” [In Africa, to feel secure in a relationship with a man is preferable to being in love with him, since he is bound to make you suffer]. *Lettre d’une Africaine*, p.24.


34 James, *In Their Own Voices*, p.18.

35 Emphasis added.

36 Significantly, this reverses the “liberal” reading of the rejection of “bushwomen” for more fashionable women prevalent in earlier male texts such as those listed in endnote 29 of this chapter.

38 Re-Creating Ourselves, p.53.

39 For example, the majority of Flora Nwapa’s novels, many of Buchi Emecheta’s novels, such as *The Bride Price* (1976) and *Double Yoke* (London: Ogwugwu Afor, 1982); Zaynab Alkali’s *The Stillborn* (1984); Thérèse Kuoh-Moukoury, *Rencontres essentielles* (1969; 1981); Lydie Dooh-Bunya, *La Brise du jour* [The Morning Breeze] (Yaoundé: Editions CLE, 1977); Mariama Bâ’s two novels, *Une si longue lettre* (1979) and *Un chant écarlate* (1981); Gad Ami’s *L’Étrange héritage* [The Strange Inheritance] (Lomé, Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1985); Tanella Boni’s *Une vie de crabe* [A Crab’s Life] (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions du Sénégal, 1990); Calixthe Beyala’s *Seul le diable le savait* [The Devil Alone Was Aware] (Belfond: Le Pré aux Clercs, 1990); Mpoudi Ngolle’s *Sous la cendre le feu* (1990); Véronique Tadjo’s *Le Royaume aveugle* (1990).


41 Ibid, pp. 53, 54.


43 Ibid.

44 I discuss the romance genre in relation to two novels, Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle’s *Sous la cendre le feu*, and more particularly in Marie-Gisèle Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour*, including Western versus African ideologies, in chapter 4, pp.272-73.

45 This comment is quoted on the back of the edition of *Changes* already referred to. Aidoo’s original comments stem from a 1967 interview by Maxine McGregor; see Dennis Duerden and Cosmo Pieterse, eds., *African Writers Talking* (London: Heinemann, 1972), pp.18-27 “I cannot see myself as a writer, writing about lovers in Accra because you see, there are so many other problems...,” p.19.


48 The issue raised by texts like *Fureurs* is whether the view of the protagonist is “distanced” from that of the narrator. In his study on Achebe, Arthur Ravenscroft comments on his novel, *A Man of the People* (1966). In alluding to the narrator/principal protagonist, Odili, Ravenscroft remarks: “it would be all too easy to confuse the character’s sentiments with the author’s.” However, Ravenscroft comments that the language used by Odili “is a constant reminder that we cannot take him at face value.” Although many commentators would endorse Ravenscroft’s reading, others have read the text in a different way, believing that Odili is a reliable narrator and the controversy has come to be known as the “Ravenscroft heresy.” See Chinua Achebe (*Burnt Mill, Harlow: Longmans, Green and Co., 1969*), ed. Ian Scott-Kilvert, p.32. For an account of the difference between reliable and unreliable narrators, see Wayne C. Booth’s *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).


50 Emecheta, “Feminism with a small ‘f’!”, p.176.

51 Ibid, p.177.


54 See Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy*, p.61.

55 Dunton, “‘Wheything be dat?’” p.434.

56 D’Almeida concurs with this reading with regard to both the murder and lesbian episode, *Francophone African Women Writers*, pp. 93, 98.
Dunton, "‘Wheything Be Dat?’," concludes that "[w]hat remains conspicuous [...] is the abstention among African writers, and even among the most searching and responsive of these, from a fully characterized and nonschematic depiction of a homosexual relationship between Africans," p.445.

According to John Berger, "Men look at women, women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female." *Ways of Seeing* (1972; London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1983), p.47.


Ibid., p.214.

This aspect of African women’s behaviour is discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis, in relation to excision.

I am not suggesting here that Islam is totally against women’s emancipation. This subject is extremely complex and the general consensus on women’s rights in Islam seems to be that it is the interpretation of the Koran, rather than the stipulations contained within it, which has led to women’s victimisation. See, for example, Herbert L. Bodman and Nayereh Tohidi, eds., *Women in Muslim Societies: Diversity Within Unity* (Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p.8.


For example Anthony Appiah in *Our Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) has stated that the circulation of cultures in our postmodern moment makes it inevitable that "we are all already contaminated by each other, that there is no longer a fully autochthonous echt-African culture awaiting salvage by our artists," p.155. See also Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

*The Dilemma of a Ghost* (Accra: Longman, 1965) and a subsequent play *Anowa* (1970), as well as short stories and poetry.

James, *In Their Own Voices*, p.22.

I do not mean to suggest that third wives necessarily have a lower status, but as already mentioned with regard to Esi, her mother is worried about her status as a second wife, as opposed to a first wife, so there is a suggestion in the novel itself of such an existing hierarchy.


Judith Van Allen has discussed the “dual-authority” systems present among the Igbo within which each sex manages its own affairs and women’s interests are represented at all levels. See her article “‘Aba Riots’ or ‘Igbo Women’s War’: Ideology, Stratification, and the Invisibility of Women,” in Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay, eds., *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1976),
According to Van Allen “actual or potential autonomy, economic independence, and political power did not grow out of Western influences but existed already in traditional “tribal” life,” p.62. See also Kamene Okonjo, “The Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Midwestern Nigeria,” Women in Africa, pp.45-58.

78 James, In Their Own Voices, p.24.

79 According to Van Allen, within the system of British colonisation: “Strong male domination was imposed on Igbo society both indirectly, by new economic structures, and directly, by the recruitment of only men into the Native Administration. In addition, the new economic and political structures were supported by the inculcation of sexist ideology in the mission schools,” “Aba Riots’ or ‘Igbo Women’s War,’” p.80.

80 In novels centred in Muslim countries, polygamy becomes a more central issue in the protagonists’ lives, such as in Mariama Bá’s two novels, but of course polygamy was a traditional practice in pre-Muslim African societies.


83 According to Muslim tradition, a husband must spend three consecutive days with each of his wives, who would cook for him and with whom he would spend the night.

84 Steady, The Black Woman Cross-Culturally, p.6, cited in Ogunyemi, Africa Wo/Man Palava, p.82.

85 Emecheta, “Feminism with a small ‘f’”, p.178.

86 Ogundipe-Leslie, Re-Creating Ourselves, p.53.

87 Ibid.

88 Polygamy is one of the oldest bones of contention between Africans and Christian missionaries. This is reflected in the colonial cultural clash in anglophone West Africa from at least the 1840s as discussed in the archives of the Church Missionary Society.

89 Ogunyemi, Africa Wo/Man Palava, p.76. Ogundipe-Leslie makes the same point: the “woman as daughter or sister has greater status and more right in her own lineage. Married she becomes a possession, voiceless and often rightless in her husband’s family, except for what accrues to her through her children.” See: Not Spinning on the Axis of Maleness,” in Sisterhood is Global, p.501.

86 Ogundipe-Leslie, Re-Creating Ourselves, p.53.

90 Ibide.

91 I concur with Florence Stratton’s reading of this final paragraph of Nwapa’s novel, in opposition to Andrade’s. The latter believes that by formulating this question the author is wondering why the women should want to worship her, in other words that motherhood is a necessary component in their lives.

92 I disagree with d’Almeida’s contention that, because Flora Nwapa sets her first two novels in a traditional context and deals with the importance of bearing children in African society, she is therefore taking “refuge in subject matters that are safe in that they do not demand that the order of things be challenged, let alone subverted,” “The Concept of Choice in Mariama Bá’s Fiction” in Boyce Davies and Adams Graves, eds., Ngambika, pp.161-71, p.167.


95 This is not the only instance in African women’s work where a non-biological mother breastfeeds a child. See Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood, the incident described on p.62 of this chapter.

96 Emphasis added.

97 D’Almeida comments in her study on this novel that the baby boy must resemble his father “as if to deny his mortality and prove her own [Emilienne’s] obedience,” Francophone African Women Writers, p.89.

Christian also notes the more recent trend of scholarship, particularly that of women, which acknowledges the economic and social contributions of African women to traditional societies.


Such narrative irresolutions include Dominique’s disclaimed acquaintance with Godwin, Emilienne’s cook; the lack of explanation for Godwin’s hold over Eyang, who bribes him to keep quiet; the reference to Godwin’s changed behaviour after Rékia’s murder and Godwin’s unexplained absence on the day of Rékia’s death (which has never happened previously).

Sarah Ruddick has suggested that the “push toward ever increasing sophistication of reproductive technology stems from envy of female reproductive capacities and the wish to strip that capacity from the exclusive province of women,” *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), p.40.

A magnetiser is a person who uses magnetic waves to cure various problems. They practise in Europe and Rawiri herself has undergone treatment by such a practitioner. Rawiri’s aim in having her protagonist visit such a practitioner is to show the lengths to which she is prepared to go in order to try and conceive.

Personal communication by the author, Paris, December, 1996.

Coquery-Vidrovitch, *African Women*, p.18. In Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle’s novel *Sous la cendre le feu* (1990), the protagonist Mina refers to the Beti, a Cameroonian ethnic group, who practises “le mariage à l’essai” [trial marriage] to ensure that the wife is not sterile, p.142.

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Aidoo has spoken out against the politics of international aid. She sees events such as Bob Geldof’s Band Aid, even though well-intentioned, as a source of humiliation to the African populace for the African woman is now seen as “breeding too many children she cannot take care of.” See: “To Be an African Woman Writer – an Overview and a Detail,” p.157 and “Literature, Feminism and the African Woman Today,” in Delia Jarrett-Macauley, ed., *Reconstructing Womanhood, Reconstructing Feminism: Writings on Black Women* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp.156-74, p.156. The Somali male writer, Nuruddin Farah, has also linked feminist causes to international aid in a direct way in his novel *Gifts* (Harare: Baobab Books; London: Serif, 1992).

James, *In Their Own Voices*, p.15.

Ibid., p.26. See also Holst Petersen’s essay, “First Things First” referred to on p.11 of the “Introduction” to this thesis.
MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Introduction
A Mother’s Testimony – Nozipo Maraire’s Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter
Mother Loss – Yvonne Vera’s Butterfly Burning
The Leitmotif of the absent Mother: Buchi Emecheta’s Head Above Water and The Bride Price
The Search for the Mother: Ken Bugul’s Le Baobab fou and Cendres et braises and Calixthe Beyala’s C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée:-
Mother as irreplaceable: Le Baobab fou
Mother as stasis: Cendres et braises
Mother as absence: C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée

Conclusion

Introduction

In the previous chapter attitudes of women towards motherhood and potential motherhood were explored, including the somewhat ambivalent attitude of mothers towards their young daughters in Aidoo’s Changes (1991) and Rawiri’s Fureurs et cris de femmes (1989). This chapter seeks to concentrate specifically on the mother-daughter relationship, both from the point of view of the “mother,” and also from the perspective of the “daughter,” a daughter who is growing into adulthood in all the examples alluded to. In the anglophone field, the main focus of my discussion is a first novel by a Zimbabwean writer, Nozipo Maraire’s Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter (1996). I will also provide a less detailed commentary on Yvonne Vera’s recently published novel, Butterfly Burning (1998). Additionally, I will briefly comment on the mother/daughter relationship in Buchi Emecheta’s autobiography, Head above Water (1986) and her novel, The Bride Price (1976). In the francophone area I explore the Senegalese novelist Ken Bugul’s first and second novels, as together they form a fictional autobiography. Bugul has acknowledged that her first novel, Le Baobab fou (1984), is autobiographical in content and the sequel to this novel, Cendres et braises (1994) continues the story of the author’s life. I then delineate the mother/daughter relationship in Calixthe Beyala’s first novel, C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée (1987). It is noticeable, however, that it is only in the first novel
to be discussed, *Zenzele*, that the narrative is focused from the mother’s point of view, whereas
in the other texts discussed, and in many other anglophone and francophone texts by African
women writers, the perspective of the mother is notably absent.

When one considers that most early francophone writing is autobiographical, it is striking that
the figure of the mother is absent from many of the texts.¹ For example, in Nafissatou Diallo’s
*De tilène au plateau: une enfance dakaroise* (1975), the author’s mother dies when she is only
one and a half years old; in Andrée Blouin’s *My Country Africa* (1983), the writer is placed in
an orphanage at the age of three; in Ken Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou*, the author is abandoned by her
mother at an early age.² Equally in some anglophone autobiographical writing the mother/daughter relationship is marked by distance. The South African writer, Bessie Head,
tells of her mother’s incarceration in a mental institution, where Head was born, when her
mother was found to be pregnant by a black stable hand.³ Buchi Emecheta has also spoken in
her autobiography about her ambivalent relationship with her mother.⁴ In the fictional category,
the writing of contemporary novelists such as Beyala, who was separated from her mother at the
age of five and raised by an elder sister, is full of leitmotifs of the “absent mother,” and this is
also true to a certain extent in the work of Flora Nwapa. Both this writer’s eponymously named
heroines, Efuru and Idu, are motherless and other protagonists in Nwapa’s novels either suffer
from losing their mother early in life, such as Rose in *Women are Different* (1981) or experience
difficulties in their relationships with their mothers, for example, Amaka in *One is Enough*
(1981) and Kate in *Never Again*.⁵ In this chapter the relationship between mothers and
daughters in the writing, both autobiographical, semi-autobiographical, and fictional, of some of
these authors will be explored.

The autobiographical and fictional writing addressing the problem of the “absent” mother is
perhaps not so surprising when considered against a background of a tradition of fostering, a
sociological phenomenon arising in many African societies. In such cases it appears that girls
are more likely to be fostered than boys.⁶ The reasons behind widespread fostering practices are
many and varied. In relation to West Africa they can be summarised as follows: the sharing
among kin groups of the costs and benefits of child-rearing; parents are not necessarily the best
disciplinarians of their offspring, and in societies where formal education is not the norm, it

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provides a means of child socialisation. As Stanlie James has also commented: "Fostering was a means of minimizing what was often viewed as a dysfunctional emphasis on individualism within a communal setting."8

Adrienne Rich has remarked upon the fact that in Western literature there has been little writing on the mother/daughter relationship:

This cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story [...] Yet this relationship has been minimized and trivialized in the annals of patriarchy. Whether in theological doctrine or art or sociology or psychoanalytic theory, it is the mother and son who appear as the eternal, determinative dyad.9

As is clear from the above passage, Rich also suggests that what little writing there has been on the mother/daughter relationship has been treated derogatorily in a patriarchal context where it is the father-son relationship that is all-important. This remark seems equally valid with regard to the African literary corpus where male writers have also focused on the father-son relationship.10 However, Rich’s work was first published in 1976 and since that time the critical presentation of the mother/daughter relationship has increasingly formed the focus of both fictional and non-fictional texts.11 Rich herself, revising her work ten years later, with a new introduction, cites what she believes to be the one exception to the trend of neglecting the mother/daughter relationship, the work of African-American female novelists: "In recent writing by women of color in this country the affirmation of the mother-daughter bond is powerfully expressed, not primarily in terms of a dyad but as a facet of a culture of women and a group history that is not merely personal."12

Rich is not the only critic to note the tendency of minority groups in the United States to focus on the mother/daughter relationship.13 As Natalie M. Rosinsky has stated with regard to literature written by Chicana, Black and Jewish writers: "Members of racial, ethnic, sexual, and economic minority groups, in particular, have delineated their apprehension of the social forces which intervene between mother and daughter."14 Both Rich and Rosinsky underline that in minority writing the mother/daughter relationship is more likely to be treated in conjunction with other factors, Rich stressing the point that such writing is also more likely to reflect a wider community history, rather than a more personal and individual one, and Rosinsky noting that the
relationship is put under stress as a result of exterior “social forces.” It is striking that both these trends are apparent in many of the novels written by the African women writers studied in this chapter, especially Maraire’s *Zenzele*, where the unfolding of the mother/daughter relationship takes place against what may be considered the primary narrative, that of a country’s transition from colonial dependence to independence. This depiction of the mother/daughter relationship in conjunction with some form of historical rewriting of its people’s respective histories, from a woman’s perspective, can also be detected in several other works such as that of Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Wings*. Both these novels are by Zimbabweans, and it is not surprising that such authors choose to incorporate their country’s recent political history, particularly their struggles for independence and racial equality, into their fictional work.

In a more recent study of mother/daughter relationships in fiction, Marianne Hirsch, a literary theorist, discusses writing from the Victorian era to more recent writing and contends that “maternal repression” has been the underlying basis of writing by the female novelists she discusses. Even when the mother becomes a central figure in fiction, such as during the modernist period, feminist writing, both fictional and theoretical, still distances itself from a maternal discourse. Such writing, she argues, is subject to the controlling perspective of the daughters who consider that their mothers are key members of the patriarchal society of which they are so critical. In Hirsch’s view, this kind of writing “can be said to collude with patriarchy in placing mothers in the position of object, of Other – thereby keeping mothering outside of representation and making maternal discourse a theoretical impossibility.” However, Hirsch, like Rich, believes that African-American women’s writing during the 1970s and 1980s would seem to prove an exception in that it points to a feminist discourse of identity which begins with mothers, although Hirsch points out that this writing is not without its own ambiguities and repressions. Certainly Hirsch’s remarks are valid in connection with the African women writers I discuss in this chapter, although her contention that for these writers “fathers, brothers, and husbands occupy a less prominent place,” is less applicable to African writers.

African women’s writing appears to conform to various tenets of African-American women’s writing discussed by Hirsch, without going so far as to speak of a unified “black” experience.
That there are similarities of approach between these groups of writers is undeniable and African women writers themselves have acknowledged a certain affinity between them. For example, the Zimbabwean novelist, Tsitsi Dangarembga, has spoken about how women writers should “writ[e] about the things that move them” and adds that such an approach not only “come[s] from the consciousness of being a woman and the problems that arise as a result of that,” but also from “general problems” in their society.

Such writing she believes is to be found among the black American female writers: “The black American female writers touch more of me than the white ones.” Additionally, the Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, has commented upon her preference for black American women writers, believing that she has more sense of kinship with them than with Nigerians: “To me, the great writers who come from ethnic minorities writing in English come from America. I think the deep, the real deep thinkers now writing in the English language are the black women, such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, etc.”

In addition to those novels already mentioned which feature in this chapter, there are many other novels which include an exploration of the mother/daughter relationship, even if it is not always the primary focus of the author. The issues which are most frequently raised in connection with this relationship are the educational, social and cultural ramifications arising from the “generation gap.” The younger women often resent their lack of personal freedom, as seen in customs such as arranged marriages and the paying of a bride price, which are particularly apparent in Maraire’s Zenzele, Angèle Rawiri’s G’amèrakano: au carrefour and Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre.

This last-mentioned novel, with Nozipo Maraire’s Zenzele, happens to be one of the few where the narrative focalisation of the mother is primary. Is it possible to discern what may account for this? Both are epistolary novels, although Bâ’s Une si longue lettre is addressed to the narrator’s best friend, whereas Maraire’s Zenzele presents a mother writing to her daughter. In both novels the narrators have received a Western education and consequently are not only able to master the respective colonising European language, English in the case of the mother narrator in Zenzele and French in the case of Ramatoulaye, the narrator of Une si longue lettre, but they are also much more conversant with Western mores than many of the mother
protagonists depicted in this thesis. In his study on francophone African literature, in a chapter devoted to Senegalese women writers, Christopher Miller notes that Mariama Bâ’s *Une si longue lettre* is one of the very few epistolary novels written by a francophone African, and that she is the only female novelist writing in this genre. He also suggests that the epistolary novel is almost nonexistent in the anglophone African tradition. Even with the many novels published since this time, *Zenzele* would still appear to be the only epistolary novel, apart from Mariama Bâ’s, written by a female African writer.

Indeed, the significance of the epistolary genre chosen by Maraire as it pertains to the mother-daughter relationship forms part of my discussion of this novel. Equally of interest is the structuring device used by Maraire, the daughter’s desire for an education in the Western world, in this case America, for this same narrative technique is also used by the francophone novelist, Ken Bugul. We can thus compare the different ways in which these two women writers approach this subject. In the case of *Le Baobab fou* one learns all about the daughter’s experiences although very little about her education which she soon abandons. Equally, in *Zenzele* little information is given about the daughter’s activities in America or her studies there. Of primary concern are the effects of the political struggle for independence of the narrator’s country of birth, at that time known as Rhodesia, and the narrator’s relationship with her daughter, as well as with her wider family.

Although the issue of education is of both structural and thematic importance in *Zenzele* and *Le Baobab fou*, I examine the latter novel and its sequel, *Cendres et braises* under the thematics of what I term “the search for the mother.” This is not always a literal search, but a psychological and emotional quest, which, while it often replicates what has initially been a physical separation, as is the case in *Le Baobab fou*, is frequently a quest for an emotional bonding that is lacking in the relationship, as is evident in all of the three francophone works to be explored. This “lack” of a mother figure is also of utmost importance, I believe, in Emecheta’s work and in her autobiography, *Head Above Water*, as well as her novel *The Bride Price*, and my discussion of these works will concentrate on this thematic motif.
The issue of education is of course also implicated in a political discourse, the colonising powers in Africa wanting to educate its indigenous populations for ideological purposes. The ramifications of a Western style education often form a focal point in writing by African authors. One such example is Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Changes*, which formed part of my discussion on “Marriage and Motherhood” in chapter 1, and which suggests the alienating effects of a Western-style education on family relationships. Esi, the main female protagonist of *Changes*, is ambivalent about the supposed advantages of such an education when she considers how it has distanced her from both her mother and grandmother. Her education is also a source of a sense of inferiority for her mother, who feels that she does not have anything useful to impart to her daughter. Esi wonders why she has been educated, for what gain, and moreover, who had designed such an education system and for what reason:

> for surely, taking a ten-year-old child away from her mother, and away from her first language – which is surely one of life’s most powerful working tools – for what would turn out to be forever [...] with no hope of ever meaningfully re-entering her mother’s world...all this was too high a price to pay to achieve the dangerous confusion she was now in and the country now was in. (p.114)

Esi’s comments not only stress the problems caused by her lack of familiarity with her native language, but also allude to the “confusion” she finds herself in as she questions basic tenets of traditional belief such as polygamy. Aidoo’s novel underlines the difficulties inherent in an intergenerational conflict when the protagonists belong to the first generation to receive an education. Another example of this conflict is that of Ken Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou*, where the protagonist also feels excluded from the world of her mother and grandmother. In the first novel to be discussed, however, *Zenzele*, the mother has also been educated in the Western education system, although not to the same extent as her daughter, so the generational conflict which exists in *Changes* and *Le Baobab fou* is less pronounced.

**A Mother’s Testimony – Nozipo Maraire’s *Zenzele***

*Zenzele* is in the form of a letter written by an upper-middle class Zimbabwean mother living in Harare to her daughter, Zenzele, who is studying in America. Although the novel begins when
Zenzele is already abroad, the mother/narrator, Shiri, thinks back to when Zenzele was a young girl living at home, as well as delving further into her own past, when she herself was a child. She recounts her adventures, especially those with her sister Linda in the then Rhodesia. She also relives her experiences as an adolescent in love and her meeting with her future husband, a lawyer concerned with political causes. In this short synopsis it is readily apparent that this is very much a narrative about the speaking, writing, mother, Shiri, despite the fact that the novel’s title refers to Zenzele, the daughter. The narrative perspective is somewhat conservative due not only to the narrator’s character, but also to her upper middle-class position in society, and the writing at times appears somewhat flat, both stylistically and thematically. This may be explained by the almost total lack of conflict in the mother/daughter relationship as well as the conservative attitude of the narrating mother, often apparent in her tendency to speak in platitudes and in her willingness to stereotype.

The novel’s structure underlines its epistolary format in that the first sentence in each chapter is addressed to the narratee and consists either of a general comment, or more often, a piece of advice which encompasses the theme of that particular chapter. In some ways the text is a series of tableaux, many of which serve a pedagogic purpose, a cautionary tale, for the writer’s daughter with whom she cannot communicate verbally. Thus, the thematic importance of education in this novel does not derive solely, or even principally, from the daughter’s Western education, but from a more “traditional” approach through the act of storytelling. Moreover, there are many other stories contained within this framework, reminding one of the indebtedness of African writers to an oral tradition. One such story focuses on Mukoma Byron, a cousin of the narrator, who is sent to study in England and who becomes alienated from his own culture. Not all of these stories are filtered through the mother/narrator’s consciousness, one such story relating to Tinawo, a woman freedom fighter. Other stories are told to the narrator, which she in turn passes on to her daughter, one of which is told to her by her father when she absconds from school. It is in the form of a moral tale and serves to fulfil the mother/narrator’s desired pedagogic purposes. The significance of all these stories in the construction of the mother/daughter relationship will be explored.
The title of the novel under discussion reads ‘Zenzele A letter for my daughter’ rather than ‘A letter to my daughter’ which one might normally expect. Maraire’s choice of preposition seems to imply that this letter does in fact represent a gift from the mother to her daughter, which, at the end of the letter, also the end of the novel, has yet to be posted. The gift that the mother/narrator bequeaths to her daughter is an accumulated wisdom acquired over the writer’s own life, and that of her forbears, and from which she hopes that her daughter will benefit. As the writer is dying from cancer, it is also a legacy or testament, not only of her own life, but that of her extended family and community; it is also a source of sociological and historical detail of the transformation of her country, Zimbabwe, from former British colony into independent nation.

The novel begins “Today is the first day of winter, I believe” (p.1), on the surface an innocuous enough statement, but in literary accounts winter itself is often synonymous with death. Such connotations become more evident later in the same paragraph when we read, “There is something mournful about a winter dawn. It is a time of death, of loss, of flight”(p.1). By alluding to such themes so early in the novel Maraire intimates that they will play a significant role in the novel’s construction. Death is indeed a major factor in this novel: as well as being a reality faced daily by the freedom fighters evoked in its narration, it is present in the death of the narrator’s first love, the death of her parents, the death of a close friend, Amai Byron, as well as the death of the hopes that the latter had invested in her son, Mukoma Byron who abandons his African heritage; and finally, there is the approaching death of the narrator herself. Loss could be viewed as almost synonymous with death, but the main loss suffered by the narrator, apart from the death of loved ones, is that of her daughter’s departure for America to study, the central framing device in this novel. Flight again could be seen as synonymous with loss, but in this novel flight, which normally connotes an abandoning or a refusal to face up to a situation, has more positive implications. The narrator describes her daughter at one point in the novel in terms of “a rare bird,” encompassing both a colloquial and figurative meaning. In the former, the mother/narrator refers to the fact that Zenzele is an unusual and original individual; in the second she alludes to her “colourful plumage, graceful flight and beautiful songs.” Zenzele’s mother is here referring to her proposed “flight” to America to study, a flight that she believes will be a successful one for her daughter. In this instance we should note that the attitude of the
mother to her daughter's proposed departure is unusual in the corpus of African literature. It is in particular contrast to the relationship in *Nervous Conditions*, where the mother suffers a nervous breakdown when faced with the prospect of her daughter's departure for further studies. Moreover, earlier fiction by African male writers dealing with this issue tends to depict mothers as the upholders of a "traditional" way of life, consequently unable to endorse the prospect of their progeny's leaving them for further study, unlike fathers who view such a departure as inevitable; in these cases the offspring is always male.27 In *Zenzele*, the mother's attitude towards her daughter's departure reveals her knowledge and trust in her: "I would not let you go if I did not believe you had courage enough to remain true to yourself [...] Remember that your ultimate destination is the home that you left" (p. 70).

Western education plays an important role in this novel, both structurally and thematically. It is the cause of Zenzele's departure from Zimbabwe and therefore the *raison d'être* for the mother's narrative in the form of a letter to her. The mother/narrator's mistrust of Western education is apparent when she looks at her daughter's University prospectus and notices a course entitled "Western Art from the beginning to the present," and is surprised that it begins with an extensive section on Egyptian art. She is critical of the West's appropriation of the richest store of African art and civilisation. Her advice to Zenzele is to "Own your history" (p. 79). In fact, Maraire, at other instances in the novel, through her primary narrator, seeks to give a version of events which includes Zimbabwean women who have played important roles in their country's history, and she incorporates stories about some of the women freedom fighters, one of them the narrator's sister, in this novel. Voice is given to one of these female freedom fighters, a commander, who recounts her experiences as a live-in maid at the home of the head of the Rhodesian air force, where she acts as a spy. Interestingly, what inspires her to fight is not grandiose political or social ideals. As a young girl she has been promised a beautiful dress by her parents if she performs well at school and it is her memory of the way that her mother is shamed by a scornful white shop owner for daring to enter a "whites only" store which is the impetus for her revolutionary activity. Such fighting women were reputed to be "the fiercest of all" (p. 165) and in listening to their tales Shiri recognises how different she is from her sister in their respective attitudes to the political situation of their country.
The author devotes a whole chapter to the consequences of a European education on the mother’s childhood friend, Mukoma Byron. The latter follows a long line of young African men in African fiction who receive scholarships to study abroad. In another novel explored in this chapter, *Le Baobab fou*, the same experience is filtered through the eyes of a female protagonist and in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, education of females is the focal point of the narrative. In *Zenzele* although little is heard about Zenzele’s educational experiences in America, it is apparent that Maraire wishes her readers to perceive it as a positive and enriching experience through the way that her narrator, Shiri, comments on her daughter’s activities. In this way *Zenzele* appears to be the only novel treating an African female protagonist’s education abroad as an unproblematic experience, both Bugul and Dangarembga incorporating a discussion of alienation and psychotic behaviour, stemming from this same experience. This conclusion is tempered somewhat however by the fact that it is Shiri who is the main protagonist in this novel, her daughter little more than a cipher.

The principal reason for the mother/narrator’s relating the story of Mukoma Byron appears to be in order to warn her daughter about the dangerous effects of a Western education, which may result in alienation from one’s community and country, and correspondingly, from one’s own mother. It also allows her the opportunity for much social commentary, including a critique of colonised countries’ general willingness to praise undiscriminatingly all that is Western, as well as their unrealistically high expectations of the children whom they send abroad to be educated. Mukoma Byron is one such person and is the epitome of the alienated native as described in Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs*.28

The joyful departure of Byron from his native village, Chakowa, in order to study medicine at Oxford, is one that promises many benefits for the whole community. However, his growing disenchantment with his studies and life in England are communicated to the reader through short extracts from his letters to the mother/narrator, and his growing alienation from his African background is deduced by the narrator as these letters become less frequent until they cease altogether. Fifteen years later Byron returns and is described as wearing a “three-piece suit, khaki safari hat, monocle, wing-tipped shoes and pipe”(p.51). His white wife is suitably superior, owning to never having expected “Rhodesia” to be so “peaceful, lovely and
clean" (p.52), both descriptions tending towards caricature and stereotype on the part of the narrator, Shiri. When Byron visits his sick mother and is unable to converse with her in their native Shona, he is alienated from the very person who gave him life, who has in fact waited patiently for his return as a doctor so that he may cure her of her illness. Indeed, the act of translating itself, which he asks Shiri to perform, is equally ineffective as it is not the words themselves that she has problems translating, but the concepts they represent, which she believes are alien to her own culture. Byron’s words are addressed to his mother in such a neutral, impartial manner that it is an extremely difficult task for Shiri “to frame them into coherent and meaningful Shona sentences. [She] had to add respect and compassion where there was none” (p.59). In fact, Byron has not only adopted the former colonial power’s language, but also its denigrating vision of his country, which he sees as a cultural desert and a political swamp, a waste land. When Byron’s mother learns that he never completed his medical studies and that he has made London his home, she curses him and he leaves in shame.

It would seem that the purpose of this tale told to Zenzele is principally a warning of the alienating effects of assuming the colonial language to the point where one loses one’s native language and one is unable to express one’s identity and belonging to one’s community, an issue explored particularly in earlier novels by African male writers. It is also a warning of what befalls African children when they do not manage to maintain the mother/child bond. The same situation is noticed in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* when the son also becomes culturally assimilated as a result of a Western education and the mother/son relationship is jeopardised. What is noticeable also in *Zenzele* is the role of Byron’s sister, Chipo, who has stayed in the village with their mother and is depicted by the narrator as a source of tradition and stability, not having had access to a Western education. When Byron arrives she is overjoyed to see her brother:

With a twist and a leap she joined the league of ululating women. Her bare feet, oblivious to the stones and rubbish in the path, pounded a joyous rhythm and raised a screen of red dust before us. At the head was Chipo, wearing a torn yellow skipper and a brightly printed jira wrapped around her waist in the rural fashion. Behind her followed a dusty Mukoma Byron, clad in a beige wool three-piece suit and puffing at his pipe nervously as he attempted to preserve his stiff posture despite the waves of well-wishers that surged forward to embrace him. (p.57)
There is a strong contrast between the description of Byron, his alienation only too transparent in his unsuitable clothing and posture, and that of his sister, portrayed as living in harmony with the other women, and by extension, her whole community. By also depicting this character as someone who is in harmony with the earth, for it is noticeable that Chipo does not feel its abrasions, Maraire may also be suggesting that she is consequently in unity with her country, in contrast to Byron’s alienation. Chipo is shown kneeling close to her mother, muttering into her ear and caring for her, again in contrast to Byron who keeps his distance from his sick mother and does not even speak to her in his native Shona. Unfortunately, perhaps, the contrast is achieved by employing very stereotyped portraiture: that of Byron’s caricature of the typical English gentleman and also that of Chipo who is essentialised and idealised, in harmony with the land.

The “story” of Byron has been incorporated into oral folklore and serves as a warning to other young people who go to the town to study. Shiri reiterates to her daughter that, unlike the knowledge provided by a Western education, “The village is our library”(p.7), implying the orality inherent in such a situation. The tales told by the ancients are a “living history”(p.7). She does not want her daughter only to be exposed to a Western formal education, but also to know “the lyrical, the romantic and the tragic that have shaped us as Africans”(p.8), but believes her daughter will remain true to herself because of the way she has been raised. Ironically, however, one of the main reasons why she deems it necessary to write to her daughter is to explain, perhaps apologise, for her feelings of inadequacy in her role as a mother. It is clear that such a lack of confidence stems from the patriarchal society in which she lives and whose rules and stipulations she feels she must abide by:

I was often bewildered by the task of motherhood, that precarious balance between total surrender and totalitarianism. [...] I was struck by the absurdity of my predicament as a woman. I had been excluded from the social contract that drafted and perpetuated those very rules that it fell to my lot to inculcate into you. Had it been up to me, I would have constructed a very different world for you. There would have been more laughter, more colour, less struggle. (p.3)

Not only does Maraire, through her protagonist, point to the problems faced by women living in a patriarchal society, but she also suggests that such a society may benefit from the different vision that women are able to offer, one that offers a brighter prospect. Hirsch has also pointed to the fact that the actions of mothers are important indicators of a society’s values: “Mothers
who must work to raise children to be acceptable members of their society can reveal a great deal about the functioning of ideology and the processes of assimilation and interpellation."

The narrator further belies her own capabilities when she states that the world must be full of more “illustrious and better qualified women” to serve as “far superior” (p.5) role models. She refers to her writing as a “curious distillation of traditional African teaching, social commentary and maternal concern” (p.5). In fact, if we look carefully at the mother’s writing, the finished product as it were, in the form of the novel Zenzele, it is indeed possible to categorise her writing under these three sections, the latter category of maternal concern being evident throughout, but highlighted in a few instances. Such writing, embodying the narrator’s own life, as well as that of her family and extended community, also plays an important role in forming the writer’s identity, as she herself recognises: “These are the stories that have made me what I am today” (p.5). In this latter remark, the writer also suggests the importance of stories in the formation of character and the construction of one’s life.

This traditional African teaching is apparent in the form of the novel itself, in its emphasis on several different stories contained within the one narration. In the African oral tradition stories were passed on from generation to generation, those from mother to daughter perhaps particularly important, as suggested in Trinh T. Minh-ha’s observation that “[t]he world’s earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women.” The mother/narrator stresses the importance of Zenzele’s role in passing on the various customs and familial networks: “As my daughter it will be your responsibility to maintain those links for all of us” (p.31). Although the stories contained within the novel are written, rather than spoken, this is necessitated because of the daughter’s absence. Moreover, the daughter herself is present in some of the retrospective narration, and therefore the novel is, in this respect, contained within a framework of an oral tradition whereby the mother transmits knowledge and advice. In this way, although the entire novel could be classified as traditional African teaching, many of the mother’s comments provide a social commentary, and thus she not only provides insights into her own character, but extends and elaborates upon the various traditional, cultural and political discourses present in the novel.
A typical example of traditional African teaching contained within the novel which is passed on from mother to daughter, is a cautionary tale concerning the ideology of motherhood. It is initially related to the narrator by her father (Zenzele’s grandfather) when she is a young girl and subsequently told to Zenzele. The narrator’s father recounts the story when she has just returned home after having absconded from school in order to meet a boy. She finds her father waiting for her and guiltily wonders if he is aware of her truancy. The subject matter of the story told to her confirms her fears, as it relates to a woman who is led astray by her lover. The woman in the story is married to a much older man and, although he treats her kindly, she becomes bored and takes a lover. The woman’s lover persuades her to poison her husband, and they then set off together to a new land. During the journey the lover persuades the woman to drowned her only daughter, so as to leave them completely unfettered and free to live their lives together. When she reluctantly agrees to do this, she is abandoned by her lover because of her cruel behaviour. The ideology of motherhood in this story is omnipresent, especially apparent in the lover’s reaction to her deed: “What sort of an unnatural woman are you? What sort of mother would drown her own child with her bare hands? You have killed that to which you gave life” (p.110). It is noticeable that the lover does not reject the woman after she has murdered her husband, but only after the act of infanticide which he finds totally unacceptable, despite the fact that he is the instigator of this action.

Upon telling Shiri this story, her father advises her that she must never be led astray from what she believes to be right and wrong: “There is not a man in the world who is worth your dignity. Do not confuse self-sacrifice with love” (p.111). What is striking in this story is the fact that it is the woman who is deemed to be the guilty perpetrator due to her lack of constancy and moral fibre in not only taking a lover, but in letting herself be led astray by him, both in the murder of her husband, and in the killing of her daughter, whereas the guilt of the lover is barely mentioned. If one attempts to categorise this story within the African oral tradition, it would seem to conform to what Joyce Hutchinson refers to as the “Romanesque Story,” and more specifically to the section she refers to as “stories based on human failings and weaknesses, often from married life, frequently related to female indiscretion,” which form part of her edition of the Senegalese writer Birago Diop’s *Contes Choisis.*
If we look at the broader context in which the father’s narration is embedded, it becomes evident that his is very much a patriarchal discourse. As Shiri’s father begins to speak to her, her perception of him is of someone who sounds “like a cross between a priest giving a blessing and a judge meting out a sentence. He became omniscient and fearsome” (p.108). As priest and judge therefore her father represents authority both in this world and in the world to come, and although the story’s framework is a traditional African one, the images of power evoked by the narrator when confronted by her father’s demeanour, are representative of a colonial authority. The reception and endorsement by the narrator of her father’s teaching, both as a young girl and as an adult, is also noticeable: “I had learned my lesson. I have thought of this tragic tale over and over. It has served me well in times of confusion and weakness in all things. I now pass it on to you. Remember it well” (p.111). The story’s symbolic significance extends therefore from its context of traditional African teaching into an unintended wider social commentary by the narrator, who has unquestioningly accepted the strictures of a patriarchal authority, not only for herself, but also for her own daughter. In a sense this story can also be considered a microcosm of the text as a whole in its theme of the clash of traditional and modern values and the need to find a valid way of reconciling them.

We are not privy to Zenzele’s reaction to her mother’s exhortation to “remember” the story she has passed on to her, but it is noticeable that Zenzele rejects much of her mother’s teaching. This is particularly apparent in their discussion of various traditional African cultural practices, such as lobola, or bride price. In this exchange, the author, by presenting two sides of the argument and from the point of view of two different generations, is able to widen the mother/daughter discussion and present both positive and negative aspects of these cultural practices, as well as the ways in which each generation can influence the other. In the case of lobola, Zenzele considers that this practice gives rise to women being treated like property, exchanged for a few cattle and some cash, whereas her mother believes that it is not a purchase, but an expression of appreciation for the parents who have raised a daughter well. Moreover, Shiri widens the discussion to incorporate how such cultural practices have been viewed by the West and counsels her daughter not to take the Western anthropologist’s view of their culture:

They perceive our customs through their lens. There are terms and customs that cannot be translated adequately into their language and so become distorted. Lobola is called a ‘bride
price, kings are ‘chiefs’, our medicine is called ‘witchcraft’ and our religion is labelled ‘animist’. They do not capture the spirit of our culture. (p.32)

The tendency of the mother to stereotype all anthropologists as narrow-minded and Eurocentric is noticeable. However, she does admit that the practice of *lobola* is beginning to come into disrepute, citing as an example a Nigerian living in London who wired the bride price to Nigeria, which was accepted by the mother without having met him. In such a case he would consider that he had “bought” his bride-to-be, without a ceremony to mark the occasion. Although Zenzele concedes the premise behind *lobola*, she still regards it as a transferral of property, mitigated to a certain extent, she believes, by the fact that the parents of an educated women receive a higher *lobola* and that, accordingly, the groom and his family obviously value educated women more highly. Such reasoning, however, serves to undermine the very premise of Zenzele’s argument, that of “bidding” for a suitable partner.

A further point of contention between Zenzele and her mother is her concern about the process of “naming” as it applies to the female gender. She asks why it is that women are known by the name of their children, giving them an identity primarily as a housewife and mother, “As if no matter what she does she is a housewife first and foremost. As if her only identifiable contribution to mankind was the act of childbirth”(p.34). Shiri argues that this practice applies also to fathers of the children, which Zenzele concedes, but insists that it does not apply to the same extent. Moreover, Zenzele is perturbed by the fact that women have to give up their own name upon marriage and take that of their husbands. Such a practice is not of course confined to the African continent. Zenzele asks: “Who made us the accommodating gender? Men have stability and constancy in their identity. [...] Our names must be a reflection of our relationship to this constant other, as if our own identity were not enough”(p.35). 33 This questioning of gender bias is a basic tenet of Western feminism, propounded as early as Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, where much of what she writes is based precisely on the fact that woman has always been considered as man’s “other.” What is interesting in the context of the mother and daughter’s opposing stances, however, is how, under the onslaught of Zenzele’s questioning, her mother begins to re-examine such issues. Moreover, even though she tries to tell herself that how a person is named is irrelevant, she recognises deep down inside that it does matter, so that she ends up actually endorsing her daughter’s more feminist impulses. Maraire points to the fact
that, whereas as a young woman the narrator never questioned her wifely and motherly role, she is now forced to interrogate those values that she is attempting to inculcate into her daughter. Such an overturning of the mother/daughter symbiosis is also evident in other texts to be studied, especially in Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*, where the daughter actually seems to take on the mother’s role.34 In *Zenzele* the mother/narrator recognises the importance of her domestic environment to her and that it was in her kitchen that she feels that she can make sense of the world. Indeed, Shiri’s is not the only case in African women’s fiction where domesticity tends to form a major focus in the protagonist’s life. In fact, such behaviour has been a cause of negative criticism with regard to commentary on certain African novels. Stratton is one such critic with respect to Mariama Bâ’s protagonists in her two novels, Ramatoulaye in *Une si longue lettre* and Mireille in *Un chant écarlate*, whom Stratton describes as being totally obsessed with housework.35

With her focus on a domestic narrative, the mother/narrator tends to exclude a nationalistic discourse, which is nevertheless present in other stories within the novel, notably that of Shiri’s sister, Linda, and her friend, Tinawo. Instead, the narrator’s more domestic narrative includes an exploration of personal relationships, such as those between herself and her own parents, her lover, her husband, her sister and prominent among them, the relationship between herself and her daughter. However, she does occasionally feel threatened that a lack of such nationalistic fervour on her part limits the intimacy between them. An example of such fears is apparent when Zenzele is absorbed in a conversation with her father about his life in America as a student at the time of the black consciousness movement. Shiri wonders how she can compete for her daughter’s attention as her husband expounds on African culture, politics and development. The mother’s reaction is one of exclusion: “I suddenly felt all alone in my corner chair, knitting. I was outside the glow of admiration that you were beaming on your father. [...] You were fascinated – delighted to have found a fellow comrade in your own father”(pp.74-75).

As Zenzele’s father further expostulates on the continuing economic exploitation of the Third World, the mother’s voice intrudes into the narrative as she knits her daughter a cardigan:

> While I was working to weave you something warm and protective, your father was exposing you to the harshness of life. My hands could not keep pace with his words. You would one day outgrow my sweater, but his story would suit your body, mind and soul perfectly for eternity.

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His words would become a part of you, while my little jumper would always be external, an extra layer between you and the world outside. He would win, because you stood on common ground. Why can I not see what you see? Where are you looking? There is a vision of some 'greater-than-this' that you share but that I cannot see – some snapshot that you carry around like a soldier of his beloved, which gives you the courage to fight, to cast away this domestic tranquillity that I have created for you, and to seek out life’s difficulties. (p.76)

Although the maternal concern of the mother/narrator to spare her daughter the harsher realities of life is evident, she has internalised the distinction discussed by Beauvoir, that man is a transcendent being while woman is immanent, when she states her belief that her husband’s story is more valuable than hers because he evokes “eternal” truths, a “greater-than-this” vision, rather than something that belongs to the more mundane and practical world. The latter world is precisely where she consigns herself and the insignificance she accords it is apparent in her perception of the garment that she has knitted as extraneous. Nevertheless, it is noticeable that the knitted jumper is still something that stands between her daughter and the outside world and is thereby offered as a protection, both literally and more symbolically. It is interesting to note also that the mother/narrator feels threatened by her child’s closeness to her father; she views her and her husband’s competing visions of life as a battle which he would “win” because his vision was shared by their daughter. The metaphor of a battle is further extended in the image of her daughter as a soldier carrying a snapshot of his beloved symbolising a source of strength which is required for war. In order to transcend the ordinary, to actively engage in a battle, perhaps for independence on a personal as well as a political level, the daughter has taken on the “masculine” role as her mother imagines her as a “male” soldier, although women, fought as “freedom fighters” in the chimurenga or Second Liberation Struggle in Rhodesia at that time. The mother, although her own sister was a member of these forces, is still conditioned by the gender hierarchy which she feels disables her in her relationship with her daughter.

In conjunction with her husband, the mother/narrator realises that the foreigner’s view of Africa is that of “an object to be acted upon”(p.77). Accordingly Africa is seen as “a premature infant, defenceless, undernourished and underdeveloped, unable to sustain life”(p.77). It is noticeable in this extract that the mother/narrator adopts the metaphor of Africa as a premature infant to incorporate the West’s vision of Africa, in need of “a plethora of complex Western technology”(p.77). Thus it is an image of a child no longer in the warmth of a symbiotic
relationship with its mother. She then makes use of the analogy of the child, which is Africa, freeing itself from its adoptive parents. Perhaps she is implying that, just as Africa needed to sever the bonds between itself and its former colonial masters, in the same way the child needs to become independent from its mother, a process she undertakes in her relationship with Zenzele. She alludes to the importance of writing one’s own history in the process of nationalistic endeavour: “Until we begin to put our pen to paper, we historically do not exist” (p.78), thus raising an issue common in postcolonial debates, that of writing from the periphery to question and replace the writing from the centre. Although ostensibly the narrator is here referring to the Zimbabwean people in the context of the need for self-definition, her remark is equally applicable, in another context, to African women writers who, until they entered the literary forum, had to have their stories told for them by their African brothers; and furthermore, in the context of the mother/daughter thematics in African women’s writing, it is also important that “mothers”, as well as “daughters” have the opportunity to tell their story. Moreover, ironically, at the same that the narrator is voicing her inferiority compared to her husband’s intellectual capacities, she is actually asserting her own significance as author of a narrative in which he is contained.36

Another story contained within Zenzele also deals with the ideology of motherhood in relation to a wider Africa. In fact, it could be said to be representative of the Mother/Daughter relationship whereby the continent of Africa itself assumes the role of the “Mother,” in this case to a young African-American girl who travels there. This young African-American woman is adopted by many different African “mothers” and, in naming herself “Sister Africa” she takes on the identity of her adoptive country. The manner in which she is adopted by various African families suggests a form of surrogate parenting, common in African culture, and also reflects the frequently told tale of the desire of many black Americans to travel to Africa in search of their roots and, consequently, also incorporates a discussion of Pan-Africanism. The motif of such Americans returning to Africa in search of their roots is a focus of much writing by African and Caribbean women writers, particularly Maryse Conde’s Heremakhonon (1976) and Myriam Warner-Vieyra’s Juletane (1982).37 The story contained within Zenzele concerns a young woman whose African father had married, and subsequently abandoned, her American mother when Sister Africa herself was still only a child. As a young woman, she travels to Africa in
search of her father, her mother refusing to talk to her about him for fear of raising too many painful memories. The name Sister Africa confers upon herself is reminiscent of Ama Ata Aidoo’s protagonist, Sissie Africa, in her first novel Our Sister Killjoy. It is noticeable that, just as, in the latter novel, Sissi rejects the name Mary, with its European connotations, likewise, in Zenzele, Sister Africa does not retain the names given to her either by her own parents, or by her adoptive African parents. C.L. Innes has pointed out, in reference to Our Sister Killjoy, the significance of Sissie’s rejection of the name of Mary, which she was called in school, in comparison to the German woman she meets, Marija, whose name also signifies Mary in English. She believes that in the rejection of this name Sissie has “rejected this western concept of femininity... a female identity derived solely from motherhood, sexuality and the centrality of the nuclear family - and [in her acceptance of her name Sissie] has asserted an identity as comrade which nevertheless acknowledges gender and a wider, African concept of family.” In the case of Sister Africa, she does not adopt the name of her various adoptive African families but instead, by embracing the name of Sister Africa, she interweaves her life with theirs and widens the adoptive symbolism of her name. In this way she becomes the sister of all her “fellow” [sic] Africans. Such widespread adoption could be viewed as symbolic of a new concept of parenting. When she eventually finds her father, neitherrecognises the other, and there is a suggestion in the novel that the political cause is more important at that time than the personal. Although she has begun the search for her father in order to provide herself with some sense of identity, she realises that, at the time of their meeting, “it was no longer a matter of identity [...] I knew then who I was, for my African families had given me that”(p.100). She realises, however, that “He was a man who embraced the whole race as his family. Like me, he had no need of the nuclear family”(p.105).

As I pointed out in Chapter 1, surrogate parenting is not an unusual phenomenon in Africa. In Zenzele the narrator also seems to act as a surrogate mother to her younger sister, Linda, and her friend, Tinawo. The latter’s stories of the armed struggle for independence form quite a large part of the novel. As the narrator remarks, “I sat next to them, these two girls, now women, now guerrillas, whom I had virtually raised. Yet I did not know them. And there was some boundary that could never be crossed”(p.166). As in the case of her relationship with her own daughter, the closeness that she feels towards her sister and friend is marred by their differing
attitudes towards the colonial occupation. The narrator admits to shunning danger rather than facing it, and that she is not at all attracted to the world of battle. However, although she cannot pass these stories on to Zenzele from her own experience, she recounts those that are told to her by Tinawo and also suggests to Zenzele that she should ask her aunt to tell her these stories, believing them to be an important heritage to be passed on. In this way, as well as contributing to this process in passing on the stories told to her, she is also perhaps preparing the way for a supportive surrogate mother/daughter relationship between Linda and Zenzele after her own death.

The narrator also enjoys a close mother-daughter relationship with her mother-in-law and is the recipient of her life story, just as she passes her own on to her daughter, when her future mother-in-law visits her in her bedroom on the eve of her wedding day. Her story is told in an entirely different mode to the epistolary format used by the narrator to her own daughter, the orally-told tale indicative of the fact that her future mother-in-law had never been taught to read and write. Instead she makes use of allegory, in the form of her own body, its shape and its various marks and crevices, as it has been moulded during her lifetime, especially in connection to her offspring, in order to trace her story. In this story the maternal discourse is omnipresent, as is that of the natural world, both of which seem to be linked when she closely associates a woman’s body with nature, which follows the cycle of the moon.40 By laying Shiri’s hand on her wrinkled cheeks, making her caress each crevice, she further links the two women’s bodies:

That wrinkle was from the tears I shed at his birth [...] that line was when he began to talk [...] That furrow [...] was when he left the farm and joined the struggle [...] and that little crease, that is from grinning at the sweet memory of his success. And that one [...] was when they threw him into jail, and they beat him because he tried to defend the boys who were fighting for our freedom. (pp.42-43)

The manner in which this story is told, with its emphasis on bodily contact between the two women is reminiscent of the way Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the way memories are transmitted from woman to woman, “from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand... The speech is seen heard, smelled, tasted, and touched.”41 Shiri’s mother-in-law considers her whole body as a testimony to the love she has given her family. She also emphasises the orality inherent in her speech when she tells the narrator that it was her own mother-in-law who had passed such knowledge on to her on her wedding night “so that the wisdom of our ancestors may swell and

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ripen with each new bud that flowers. So our roots grow deeper and our words never die" (p.44). Furthering the metaphor of woman as nature, she alludes to how, just as nature "dresses herself for every season" (p.44) so "[a] woman must always be proud and look after herself" (p.44). The last remark is very similar to the advice given to Shiri as a young girl by her father, such wisdom of the ancestors forming part of the traditional lore passed on to her. Such words leave the writer pensive: "Everyone, it seemed, from my mother to your father’s mother, had their own definition of what it meant to be a woman. And [...] I knew that somehow we all had to find our own way, our own words, our own season" (p.45).

The generational nature of this story is also present in the narrator’s construction of African womanhood. She reflects on the possible meanings inherent in this construction when Zenzele, who is obviously preoccupied by what it means to be an African woman, asks for her mother’s opinion on this subject. In order to answer her, the narrator instinctively thinks back to her own mother for the reply that she feels certain she would have given: “She would have raised up her thick muscular arms as she often did and replied, ‘Do you see these hands? These are my words and their work is my testimony. Your words are your deeds [...] To be an African woman means to work hard’” (p.39). Although the mother/narrator had always believed that her own mother was the epitome of the African woman, she now realises that her daughter, with her constant questioning and unwillingness to accept the path ordained to her by her race and gender, may also represent what it means to be an African woman, envisioning thereby a synthesis of the two. In fact, Zenzele’s refusal to remain silent and accept such racial and gendered stereotypes, parallels a recent trend in recent African women’s writing, to overturn earlier stereotypes of African women in writing by men and replace them with more complex and politically mature individuals with agency, denied them by their male authors. In answer to her daughter on what it means to be an African woman, she replies: “‘It is to be strong, Zenzele. It is to be at peace within. You must always listen to that inner voice and not permit others to drown it out. [...] it is in some ways to be selfless, to serve others yet to know and defend your rights to the bitter end’” (p.40).
This definition of what it means to be an African woman, a combination of strength and inner peace, assertiveness and selflessness, is a stage which the narrator seems to have herself reached by the novel’s end. Her advice to Zenzele is:

Being an African woman is what you will make of it, Zenzele. But never forget that for the majority, it also means to rise out of bed before others, to make the cold kitchen warm, to work the fields in the blazing heat, to walk for miles on dusty paths carrying water on your head, wood under your arms and a baby on your back. (pp.40-41)

Such a reference raises the issue that, in practice, writing by African women most often centres on the educated, urban dweller. Such a discourse can never capture the experience of the vast majority of African women who are oppressed by poverty, hunger, oppression and illiteracy.43

As suggested earlier, the author of Zenzele intertwines the depiction of the mother/daughter relationship with the retelling by the mother/narrator of her own childhood memories which are framed by her country’s growth towards independence. It could even be viewed as a parallel movement, the mother’s growth to maturity and the country’s growth to independence, both of them focused through the mother/narrator. For example, when the mother/narrator looks back to her childhood days, she incorporates the changing political situation taking place in her country. At one point in the novel she describes the playhouse which is a special refuge that she and her sister Linda create as children and which they refer to as their “special kingdom” where they “make the rules” (p.21) and nobody can tell them what to do. Linda is specifically referring here to their brothers’ warning to leave their playing and return home. For the two girls, however, the freedom to be able to formulate their own rules is important in a society where girls are expected to obey their brothers. It also has a wider significance, in a colonial context, where the native inhabitants of what was at that time Rhodesia were governed by the laws of the white settlers. This is later acknowledged by Linda when she refuses to accompany her sister into the city, a place where she is circumscribed by all sorts of rules and regulations, in contrast to her “secret place” where she can do anything she wants. Moreover, the refuge retains its connotations of freedom years later when it serves as a place to cache food for the freedom fighters, and as a hiding place for Linda who is being sought by the Rhodesian army. The retrospective narration encapsulates a child’s vision of these politically inspired events. It is particularly apparent when the worsening political situation in the two sisters’ country is alluded to by means of games played in their car on the way into town. Where once they
counted animals hiding in the bush, later during the war they count the number of soldiers and freedom fighters they can spot. In this manner it is indeed possible to chart both an individual’s growth as well as her country’s, but it is not a journey that the narrator could have made on her own. She admits to being beholden to both her daughter and to her husband who have converted her to a more pragmatic approach in her religious beliefs, one that is more connected with life in the present and what one can do to improve it.

At the end of her letter the narrator returns to her parents’ home in Chakowa, where she feels close to their memories, and ponders the unknowables of death. She cannot believe that all is lost when one dies, but believes, as her “ancestors believed, that we pass on gifts to one another at the time of death”(p.185). One gift that will be bequeathed to her daughter is the letter that she is in the process of writing. The mother/narrator does not directly inform her daughter of her terminal illness. The reader is alerted to this fact through the writer’s musings to her dead parents. As the novel Zenzele began, so does it end. It opens with the narrator stressing that she has chosen to sit in her kitchen to be alone, yet also to be reminded of the many conversations between herself and her daughter which had taken place there. It closes with her at her parents’ home where she says she has come to be alone and yet “embraced,” presumably with the memories of her dead parents. The same idea forms the beginning and end of the novel, stressing the importance of place and memory. Finally, the narrator’s gift to her daughter is the importance of words and stories themselves:

I have lived many lives through the stories of my ancestors and the tales of those whom I have loved. This I have to treasure for eternity. I shall sing my stories in the morning with the birds and in the gales of the rains, with the howling winds and crackling thunder.

If you listen deep within, you will hear the echo of this letter no matter where your heart leads you. It is a pity that I have not more to leave you than words. But what is a life, after all, but a story, some fiction and some truth? In the end, there are words. They are the very manifestations of our immortality. (p.192)

Perhaps a comment made by the editors of a recent work on francophone women writers is pertinent to the legacy left by Shiri to her daughter Zenzele: “If female subjects are discursively constituted through history, they are also reconstituted through women’s forms of rememberance and through the stories women write or rewrite about themselves and their foremothers.” In the focus on the mother/daughter relationship in Zenzele, framed by the issue
of education in all its forms and the fight of a nation for its independence, it has indeed been possible to trace, above all, a coming to consciousness of the mother/narrator with respect to gender as well as socio-economic and political issues.

It is impossible when studying Maraire's *Zenzele* not to mention the South African male writer J.M. Coetzee's novel, *Age of Iron*, the underlying premise of which is remarkably similar to that contained in Maraire's work. It is also in the form of a letter written by its protagonist, Mrs Curren, to her daughter, who is living in America. Mrs Curren, like Shiri, is also dying of cancer, although the disease is not employed allegorically in Maraire's novel, as it is in Coetzee's, the latter much darker in tone and almost apocalyptic in nature. Just as Maraire's novel provides a social and political commentary on life in pre- and post-independent Zimbabwe, so does Coetzee's novel regarding life in South Africa under the apartheid system. As in Maraire's novel, the mother figure in *Age of Iron* passes on her values and teaching to the succeeding generation in the form of a letter. Just as in *Zenzele* Shiri's letter to her daughter was in some way a desire to attain some form of immortality, in *Age of Iron*, a similar suggestion is broached: "These words, as you read them, if you read them, enter you and draw breath again. They are, if you like, my way of living on." Additionally, there is the notion of generational continuity, as the citation continues: "Once upon a time you lived in me as once upon a time I lived in my mother; as she still lives in me, as I grow towards her, may I live in you."  

**Mother Loss – Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning***

Unlike the previous novel discussed, all of Yvonne Vera's latest novel, *Butterfly Burning*, is set in pre-independent Zimbabwe. It tells the story of a young woman named Phephelaphi who has seen what she believes to be her own mother gunned down on her doorstep. The main narrative takes place during the 1940s in a black township, but the novel refers back in time to 1896, when seventeen men are hanged by white settlers. One of the men is the father of the principal male protagonist, Fumbatha, who is born that same year. Phephelaphi and Fumbatha are
therefore both linked by tragedy which may account for the immediate attraction they feel for one another when they first meet, despite the fact that he is many years older than her. Their relationship does not last, however, as Phephelaphi begins to yearn for some kind of independent fulfilment and she applies to train as a nurse. Her acceptance is a matter of wonder for her as she is the first black female nurse to be admitted into the profession. Finding herself pregnant soon afterwards, she feels she must abort her foetus as married women are forbidden entry into the programme for fear of just such an eventuality. *Butterfly Burning* is a painful novel to read and describes in detail many such harrowing moments, including a cataclysmic ending which relates the narrator’s own death after pouring paraffin over her body and setting it alight.

The mother/daughter relationship in *Butterfly Burning* is also marked by violent circumstances. Not only does Phephelaphi witness the woman she believes to be her mother gunned down in front of her, but her biological mother nearly dies when giving birth to her. It is not until the novel’s violent climax that Phephelaphi discovers that the woman who has raised her, Gertrude, is not in fact her biological mother. It transpires that a woman named Zandile, a close friend of Gertrude, is her real mother. Indeed, Phephelaphi discovers that Gertrude has saved her life as her own mother had intended “throwing [her] into a ditch and walking away”(p.124). Zandile’s reasons for not wanting to keep her child, it seems, are based on the fear that she would no longer be able to sustain the kind of lifestyle she was used to: “Zandile did not want either this child who refused to be born or the bold magnificent scar left falling below her navel which ruined the mood of her every subsequent encounter with each man”(p.124). Although the identity of Phephelaphi’s biological mother remains uncertain, what is clear is that it is Gertrude whom Phephelaphi regards as her mother, for it is she who has raised and cared for her, a situation which stresses the importance of the adoptive parental role we have noted in other novels.

The circumstances surrounding Gertrude’s murder are mysterious. She is shot late one night by an unknown person while talking to someone in the street in the doorway of the one-room house she shares with Phephelaphi. Several days later a white policeman returns the dress which Gertrude was wearing when she was shot. Phephelaphi waits patiently in her home for a week
wondering if she will be invited to her mother’s funeral, but she hears nothing more. Not only are the circumstances surrounding Gertrude’s murder ambiguous, the narrator’s description of these events adds to the mystery and confusion. For example, when the white policeman returns the dress Gertrude had been wearing the night she was murdered, the bag containing the dress is labelled with the name “Emelda.” Phephelaphi has to sign a receipt in her mother’s name and add her own name, but she is unsure what to put: “She wrote Emelda, like it said. She was angry at the policeman for not knowing the proper name of her mother, and she decided not to offer him the truth” (p.28). In the space for her own name she wrote:

- Gertrude. Her mother’s name was Gertrude. She had adopted the name of her mother for the report, and somehow, she had separated herself from the event. Her mother placing her own name on the papers, for a woman named Emelda. Phephelaphi felt safe and handed the papers back. (p.28)

In this manner, in the substitution of names and the flexibility of identities, Phephelaphi is able to displace herself from the event. An apparent act of callousness on the part of the white policeman is therefore rendered harmless by the young black girl who allows herself the power of naming and also refuses categorising and filing within the white “justice” system.

Perhaps because she has distanced herself from her mother’s death, Phephelaphi does experience difficulties in coming to terms with it and this may be partly explained by the fact that she does not witness her burial. Because she is a “non-person” in the eyes of the white community, it is possible for her wishes to be ignored. As the narrator notes: “If she had any money and proper means her mother’s death would be hers, now it belonged elsewhere. She had nothing” (p.28). The mother/daughter relationship in *Butterfly Burning* reflects a wider political injustice where the adversity of one section of the country, its black population, is manifest throughout the novel. For example, the narrator points out that at that time it was being debated in parliament whether blacks had the right to walk on the pavements. However, the mother/daughter relationship assumes a more personal resonance, Gertrude’s death, it transpires, being the result of a jealous lover, rather than a political killing.

It is only by strengthening her ties with her community that Phephelaphi is finally able to come to terms with Gertrude’s death. At a local house a group of men gather to drink and play music and Phephelaphi is drawn to these gatherings, rather like the butterfly in terms of which the
narrator describes her, “A white butterfly, her waist a tight loop” (p.54). It is in listening to the playing of music in this house that Phephelaphi relives Gertrude’s death:

Phephelaphi feels she has heard this song before, that she has lived and breathed in it. She raises the slender arm high up to the top of the doorway and keeps it there, for the longest time that she can, that her heart can, before the pounding in her head grows to a pitch which she cannot bear. She lets go not because she wants to but because she has to. She sees again the hand falling right down to the floor and the well of misery in her own heart fills her with wonder. She forgives Emelda knowing how difficult it is to be a woman, to fly with a broken limb. [...] She wonders whether it was not Gertrude she should have forgiven rather than Emelda. [...] Finding Emelda. Emelda. Phephelaphi brings her right arm over her chest and holds down the hurt. Finally, she has found Emelda. (pp.56-57)

In remembering this traumatic event Phephelaphi also reenacts it and, in this very physical way, comes to terms with her mother’s death. However, she is still only able to face such a memory by persisting in her desire to call her mother “Emelda” instead of “Gertrude.” Such a desire suggests that, since Gertrude’s death, she has been, is still, distancing herself from the event, taking recourse in the ploy she used when signing her mother’s name as “Emelda,” the name suggested by the white policeman. Rather than being viewed negatively, however, such a tactic may be considered as a token of her resilience, her capacity to adapt. Whatever may be the purpose of renaming, it can be regarded as a tool for clarification or distraction. Additionally, her acceptance of her mother’s death appears to be dependent on her realisation that they are united by their common bond of womanhood and her ability to forgive her mother for she knows “how difficult it is to be a woman, to fly with a broken limb” (p.57). Phephelaphi alludes here to the odds that are against women who wish to fulfil themselves, but who are handicapped in the process. Phephelaphi’s understanding comes from her personal desire at this juncture in the novel to attempt to define herself other than in her relationship with Fumbatha and it is Gertrude who has helped to prepare her for such an eventuality: “No matter what disarray attended her, Phephelaphi had a mother who made sure she attended school. Gertrude, who was always ready and running, had prepared whatever avenue there was for escape” (p.60).

Unlike the close mother/daughter relationship depicted in Zenzele, that depicted in Butterfly Burning is imbued with loss. Not only is the identity of Phephelaphi’s mother uncertain, she loses the person whom she believes to be her mother while still only young herself. She also senses that their relationship was one based on a restriction of sorts, a relationship governed by a
lack of time and space. She confides to Fumbatha that: “Everything I own I have stolen. The
time I spent with my mother was something I had taken. It was not a gift”(p.25). It is as if the
child senses that her mother’s love is in a sense unavailable, unavailable because it is based on
an act of charity, itself a gift, but offered by Gertrude as a necessity to save her from certain
death at the hands of her biological mother. Indeed, Phephelaphi’s relationship with Zandile is
marked by distrust on both sides. Although Zandile had initially offered her a home subsequent
to Gertrude’s death, she later regrets her decision when it seems that her relationship with her
lover, Boyidi, may be affected. When Phephelaphi leaves Zandile’s home to live with
Fumbatha, Zandile cannot hide her relief from her and for this reason Phephelaphi rejects her
gift of a skirt, especially as she has previously burned the dress Gertrude was wearing when she
was shot. “Nothing could bring Gertrude back. If she had burnt her mother’s dress she had no
time for any other woman’s priceless memories”(p.26).

However, Phephelaphi’s fate cannot finally be escaped. Just as the effects of the native
rebellion against the white settlers is quashed at the end of the 19th century, signified by the
hanging of seventeen men, so too a wider lack of resistance is signalled: “Beyond the top of this
singular tree, beyond the Umguza River, the women raise their voices at dawn to mourn
seventeen men and thousands more. Their resistance to the settlers has been silenced”(p.8).
The lack of resistance described by the narrator in the indigenous population resonates
throughout the novel and culminates in Phephelaphi’s inability to deal with the breakdown of
her relationship with Fumbatha as well as her thwarted attempts to find fulfilment in a career.
Perhaps due to feelings of guilt for having destroyed her child, a futile act in any case as she is
once again pregnant and therefore unable to continue with her nursing, distraught at Fumbatha’s
betrayal of their love with another woman, she ends her own life: “The fire moves over her
light as a feather, smooth like oil. She has wings. She can fly”(p.129). Like the butterfly to
which she is compared throughout the novel, Phephelaphi has metamorphosed.

Falling to pieces, easy, easier than she has imagined. Much much easier than holding a man in
your arms: she has died as easily as Gertrude, readier than she ever could be. She had paused
for two full days, waiting, watching the arm falling slowly down from the doorway. Finding
Emelda. Hearing Zandile toss a soft cushioning cry in the moonlight. Laughing at Gertrude
who had the foolishness to trust a man knocking at her door. At midnight. (p.130)
So ends Vera’s novel, a disturbing account of mother love and betrayal, a woman’s frustrated attempt at self-fulfilment and the doomed nature of male/female relationships, mother and daughter both dying as the result of a lover’s betrayal. The novel’s title suggests the transient nature of Phephelaphi’s short life, one full of promise but which culminates in tragedy. Additionally, the alliteration contained in the title, as well as its metaphoric resonances, offer a hint of the poetic nature of Vera’s writing generally. As in the previous novels discussed, Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* is, however, not just an account of a single, tragic, life. Because Phephelaphi’s tale is incorporated within a wider social and political frame which points towards the inequities experienced as a result of British colonisation, the violence experienced in her life may be read as a microcosm of the life experience of the colony as a whole.

**The Leitmotif of the Absent Mother – Emecheta’s *Head Above Water* and *The Bride Price***

Buchi Emecheta’s two works discussed in this section also chart the growth of a country’s social and historical narrative as well as the more personal narratives of her respective protagonists. Additionally, in these two works and also in her novel, *The Family*, to be discussed in chapter 4, there is what might be regarded as a recurring theme of the absent mother. My initial focus is on Emecheta’s autobiography, *Head Above Water*, which introduces us to the subject matter of this discussion, her relationship with her mother and how the mother/daughter relationship is depicted in her work. In Emecheta’s autobiography not only is there an account of her own thoughts about her mother, but Emecheta has dedicated the work to her own daughter, Chiedu, who died in May 1984. In this way Emecheta’s work points to the generational notion inherent in any mother/daughter relationship. It is evident from Emecheta’s autobiography that much of her fictional writing is also autobiographical, including her novel *The Bride Price*.

Emecheta confides in her autobiography that her mother “never understood the short, silent, mystery daughter she had. Words said that she died not blessing [her]”(p.3). and Emecheta had carried the pain of these words for twenty years. In the above citation, in contrast to the anonymity engendered by the use of the passive voice in the final sentence, when Emecheta visits her mother’s grave she intuitively feels “the warmth of her presence” and knows that her mother “did not die cursing [her]”(p.4). Even if Emecheta has simply replaced a hearsay
account with her own myth, from that time onwards she is at least able to feel comforted by the perception of her mother's love.

The sub-title to this section, “the leitmotif of the absent mother” refers to the fact that in Emecheta’s early fictional work, for example, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, the mother is absent, either physically absent, or emotionally distant, or both. In the only novel to be discussed here, *The Bride Price*, the mother/daughter relationship described between the principal protagonist, Aku-nna, and her mother, Ma Blackie, is depicted as lacking in warmth and affection. Indeed, Aku-nna has a more intimate relationship with her father, who dies early in the novel. Ma Blackie, at this time, is away consulting a *dibia* in an attempt to become pregnant with her third child. Once her husband dies, and she is inherited by his brother, her childbearing duties once more take precedence over her relationship with her daughter. Instead Aku-nna finds sympathy and friendship in the local schoolteacher, Chike, with whom she falls in love. In fact, the latter appears to take on the parental role for it is he who explains to her about menstruation, which she commences at this time, suggesting remedies to relieve the pain. Such a relationship is discouraged due to Chike’s slave origins. Because of this legacy he cannot be admitted into their family according to local custom. For this reason, once she runs away and marries Chike, her relationship with her mother is virtually at an end, even though the latter appears concerned about her welfare. Aku-nna’s own life is at an end by the close of the novel when she dies in childbirth as a punishment, she believes, for marrying against her parents’ wishes.

It is noticeable that after the death of her father there is no *rapprochement* in Aku-nna’s relationship with her mother. Other female members of the community seem to look out for Aku-nna’s welfare more than her own mother. It is one of the Ibo church members, Mama Emeka, rather than Ma Blackie, who notices that Aku-nna appears hungry as the family is about to set off for Ibuza. Moreover, as they are approaching Ibuza and are met by some of the villagers, Aku-nna is offered a bicycle ride by her future husband Chike, but when she timidly refuses, her mother ridicules her in front of everybody: “She is a coward, this daughter of mine [...] All her age group in Lagos knew how to ride bicycles, but not my daughter. Too frightened!”(p.68). Such unsympathetic behaviour continues once they are settled in Ibuza and
Ma Blackie is living with her new husband when she ridicule Aku-nna for daring to make a fuss when one of the local boys grabs at her breasts and rips her blouse: “Ma Blackie cried and cursed her fortune in being saddled with such a daughter”(p.121). Initially, however, upon hearing her daughter’s terrified screams, her mother’s reaction had been to protect her daughter, yet because the person who had fought off the aggressive suitor was Chike, she cannot show any gratitude towards him because he is regarded as an outcast.

At one point in the novel Aku-nna hints that her relationship with her mother may have been more amicable in the past when she reflects on how her mother had agreed that she should not marry too young as she is so thin and under-developed. However, Ma Blackie seems to forget all her promises to her daughter when she becomes pregnant to her new husband and Aku-nna fears that she will need her bride price to see her through her confinement. Aku-nna therefore feels very bitter towards her mother: “She had heard it said often enough that one’s mother was one’s best friend, but she was beginning to doubt it”(p.122). Aku-nna’s mother does at least try to protect her daughter when the latter is married to Chike and her new husband attempts to cause Aku-nna’s death by invoking evil spirits. As Ma Blackie is receiving financial support from Chike’s family at this time, however, her concern for her daughter may be motivated by self-interest. Certainly Emecheta points to the many burdens of womanhood in the society she describes which may account for the lack of a close mother/daughter relationship.

The autobiographical nature of The Bride Price is acknowledged by Emecheta in Head Above Water. She refers to how she herself nearly died in childbirth with her first child, but was saved by the quick thinking of a nurse. When she incorporates this event in her novel The Bride Price, however, she describes it differently:

In The Bride Price Aku-nna did not recover. She died because she had gone against our tradition. The original story ended with husband and wife going home and living happily ever after, disregarding their people. But I had grown wiser since that first manuscript. I had realized that what makes all of us human is belonging to a group. [...] If one could not abide by the group’s law, then one was an outsider, a radical, someone different who had found a way of living and being happy outside the group. Aku-nna was too young to do all that. She had to die. (p.166)

Emecheta realises that if she had not exiled herself from her community it was doubtful whether she “would have been able to survive emotionally all the well-meaning advice from family and
relatives and that it was moving to England which "saved" her (p.166). Nevertheless in her autobiography the narrator reveals that it was due to a sense of belonging to a particular community that not only gave her a sense of identity, but also the impetus to implement her career as a writer. As I will now discuss, however, Emecheta stresses the fact that this sense of belonging does not just stem from the notion of a nuclear family and biological parents, but is based on a sense of belonging to an entire community.

In her autobiography Emecheta relates how her reconstruction of her life is based on what she has been told by many different "mothers," all of whom "had a slightly different version"(p.6) of events which concerned not only the story of her ancestors but also that of her birth. The latter story is related to her one evening by her Big Mother, Nwakwaluzo Ogbueyin, her father's older sister. She tells how Emecheta's mother, instead of delivering a "bouncing baby boy," which was expected of her, gives birth instead to a premature baby girl, "a scrap of humanity"(p.10) who was not expected to live, and was therefore only given water to drink. It was only when her father noted in her the fighting spirit of his own mother that he was "determined to make his daughter live"(p.10). Additionally, the narrator comments that the reason she was forgiven for both the fact that she was a girl, and premature, is that she "must have recommended [her] parents highly to the children living beneath the earth for Olisa to send [her] mother [her brother] some time afterwards"(p.11). As Cynthia Ward comments, although on the surface Ogbueyin's narrative is "fraught with examples" of the insignificance of Emecheta's birth, nevertheless Emecheta includes "contrapuntal narratives reminiscent of her mothers' 'slightly different versions' of her own story."48 In another reference to her Big Mother, Emecheta tells of the time of their first meeting and how both she and her brother are terrified of their Big Mother and screamed when she tries to embrace them. Thereupon Ogbueyin responds by weeping and smashing her ivory ornaments to pieces. After finally managing to tempt Emecheta with some food, Big Mother replies to the bystanders who are concerned about the loss of her goods: "'When has it ever been a virtue to be rich in wealth and poor in people?' [...] I looked up to the face of Big Mother. Never before had I seen anyone so full of happiness"(p.9).49 Emecheta appears to be suggesting that, despite the less than rapturous reception of her birth, her birth story is told in such a manner by her many mothers, including her Big Mother, "who seemed to have all the patience in the world" and had taken the
trouble to tell it to her “all […] in one go”(p.6) and who had already shown her solidarity when greeting her, that Emecheta was made to feel welcome in her community. Indeed, Emecheta owes another debt to her African “mothers.” She feels that she owes her career as a writer to the way in which she was influenced by the power they held as storytellers which made her want to be a storyteller herself.50 It would seem then that although the circumstances of Emecheta’s upbringing may have resulted in a rather ambiguous relationship with her own mother, which may be reflected in her novel The Bride Price, nevertheless the spirit of the “other” mothers in her community and in particular, her Big Mother, may have more than compensated her. Indeed, in The Bride Price the concept of “other” mothers is explained:

To the Ibos and some Yorubas in Nigeria, a natural mother is not a child’s only mother. A grandmother may be known as the “big mother” or the “old mother”, and one’s actual mother may be called “little mother”, if her mother or mother-in-law is still alive. The title is extended to all young aunts or elder sisters, in fact to any young female who helps in mothering the child. (p.36)

The narrator explains that the reason behind this is that children will grow up knowing many more people who they can respect, such communal parenting offsetting the natural parents’ inclination to spoil their own children. Emecheta’s description of her mother in her autobiography is of someone “who probably loved me in her own way, but never expressed it,”(p.3) perhaps indicating that the process described in the above quotation works only too well in some cases. The significance of Emecheta’s production of her novel The Bride Price is alluded to in her autobiography. It is the novel which her husband had burnt while they were still married and which she realises that she must rewrite. Its significance may finally lie in the fact that, as the narrator comments in The Bride Price: “when you have lost your father, you have lost your parents. Your mother is only a woman, and women are supposed to be boneless. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without shelter, a family without parents, in fact a non-existing family”(p.28). Certainly the attitude of Aku-ma’s mother towards her is one of ambivalence as I have discussed, but the quotation just cited in some sense explains the difficulties inherent in the mother/daughter relationship as it is depicted in The Bride Price where both mother and daughter are ultimately shown to be powerless.
Le baobab fou – Mother as irreplaceable

Le Baobab fou is published in the “Vies d’Afrique” [Lives of Africa] series and, as mentioned in the introduction to this section, Bugul has acknowledged that her book is autobiographical. Such an acknowledgement is necessary as Bugul is a pseudonym forced onto the author, Mariétou Mbaye, by her publishers for fear of scandal, the nature of the events described in the autobiography being considered far too unsavoury to have been experienced by a young Muslim woman. The writer has explained in an interview that her nom de plume, Ken Bugul, is that given by mothers to a child born after a number of still-births. It means “nobody wants [it]” and is supposed to protect the child from death. The various critics who discuss Mbaye’s pseudonym all stress the connotations of abandonment and negativity contained within it, Mildred Mortimer commenting that she is thereby proposing a leitmotif of the novel, orphanhood. The author herself stresses a more positive aspect suggested by the name, that of the ability to survive. In the same interview she remarks that women who have given birth to still-born children often use this name, believing that, if nobody wanted them, including God, or evil spirits, then the child would be more likely to survive. D’Almeida has elaborated upon this idea by pointing out that the author has escaped from the silence imposed upon her “for by naming herself Ken Bugul she ensures her survival as a writer born into a new name, in the same way that the child nobody wants is paradoxically more likely to live.” The translated edition of Bugul’s work, “The Abandoned Baobab” is followed by a sub-title “The Autobiography of a Senegalese Woman”, acknowledging the autobiographical nature of her work. In fact, the English title of this novel, The Abandoned Baobab is not a literal translation of Le Baobab fou, which literally translated means “The mad, or crazy, baobab.” The translation, with its focus on abandonment, can be said to represent the heroine’s feeling of abandonment by her mother which is displaced onto the baobab, a suggestion which will be further developed in the conclusion to the discussion on this novel.
Unlike Maraire's *Zenzele*, where the voice of the mother is omnipresent, in Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou* and its sequel, *Cendres et braises* and in Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée*, the mother's voice is conspicuously absent. In Bugul's *Le Baobab fou*, the first person narration is that of the "daughter" and the mother's dialogue is only reported; we never enter into her consciousness. Whereas Maraire's novel lends itself to a socio-political and historical reading through the mother-daughter relationship, in *Le Baobab fou*, the narrator, also called Ken, has provided above all an intimate, emotional portrait of her development from a young girl into a young woman. It also contains an overt criticism of the colonial process, but directed especially at the alienation experienced by those raised in the colonial education system, leading to travel abroad for further study. Despite the fact that *Zenzele* is an epistolary novel and *Le Baobab fou* an autobiographical one, the former is also a life story, but of the mother, not the daughter. In both novels the journey out of Africa is a central framing device. In both *Zenzele* and *Le Baobab fou* it is the daughter who undertakes the journey, but the narrative point of view is that of the narrating daughter in the latter work and it also encompasses a psychological journey as she attempts to come to terms with the fact that she was abandoned by her mother while still only a young child. In this exploration of the mother/daughter relationship, particular attention will be paid to the emotional trauma suffered by Ken in her "search for the Mother" as well as the role played by her Western education in this process. These two elements - the personal and the ideological or political - form an explicit subject of my overall analysis of this text.

*Le Baobab fou* is divided into two parts, Ken's prehistory and Ken's history, although the latter is prefaced by a small italicised section, a poetic description of the narrator's birth and ending with her attempt, at a young age, to insert a bead into her ear. Ken's prehistory is a third person narrative recounting the life of her antecedents and the settling of her village. It contains many mythical elements and it is perhaps pertinent to remember that in the titles of these sections, Ken's "prehistoire" and Ken's "histoire," the French word "histoire" means both history and story. The intertwining of "histoire" and "story" may be said to be indicative of the genre of autobiography itself with its elements of historical fact and artistic creation, the more "realistic" account of the author's life beginning with "Ken's History" and her departure for Belgium.
Le Baobab fou recounts the life of its narrator, including her childhood years, but primarily focuses on her life in Belgium where she has gone with a scholarship. The novel is told as retrospective narration and the reader is therefore also privy to the older narrator’s commentary on these events. It is told in a series of flashbacks and, at times, is nonlinear. In Europe the narrator becomes progressively alienated to the point where she contemplates suicide and decides to return to Africa. Her sense of alienation appears to be due to an amalgamation of factors: her early separation from her mother; her Western education which alienates her from her family, especially her mother and grandmother; her life in Belgium as the exotic “Other,” admired for her beauty and difference, which results in her sense of commodification, her acts of prostitution and, finally, her abortion and sense of racial confusion. However, it seems to be the early loss of her mother, while she is still only a young child, which is the point of departure for all other forms of alienation. The painful nature of this separation is compounded by the fact that her mother has always denied that she intended to leave, thus adding to her confusion and inspiring a repeated questioning throughout the narrative as to why her mother has abandoned her. As Susan Stringer remarks, “Lamentations about the loss of the mother and incantations addressing the mother are a leitmotif” in the novel, especially apparent “whenever the narrator feels powerless or anguished.” The narrator learns, when she is older, that her mother had left to look after her older sister’s young child, the narrator’s cousin, and the reason she had not taken her daughter with her was that she did not wish to take her out of school.

Indeed, it is clear throughout the narrative that the colonial system acts alongside the traumatic effects of Ken’s displacement from her biological mother in establishing the conditions for her trauma. The French colonial education system also effects a barrier between Ken and her entire family, instanced on the school’s speech day when nobody is there to witness her success. Moreover, it could be said that she actually replaces one set of ancestors by another, when, in keeping with the policy of assimilation, she is taught to consider the French as her rightful ancestors, as is seen in the well-worn refrain “nos ancêtres, les Gaulois” [our ancestors, the Gauls]. The most unfortunate effect of Bugul’s assimilation into Western cultural mores, is her rejection of her mother: “Par moments, la mère avait voulu m’accrocher et je refusais. Je ne pouvais pas accepter et me satisfaire d’un secours émotionnel de compromis. Plongée dans
mes fanstasmes, je rejetais la mère par mes références occidentales" (p.143) [At times the mother wanted to [become closer] and I refused. I couldn’t accept or be satisfied with an emotional rescue based on compromise. Mired in my fantasies, I rejected the mother through my Western references, p.124].

Such Western references include not only the school attended by Ken, but other symbols of colonial infrastructure, such as the local railway station, both of which serve to underlie the role that the colonial process will play in the narrator’s future alienation. As the train leaves the station Ken runs behind it as it disappears into the distance, stumbling along the iron rails as she tries to keep up with it. A prefiguring of this eventual separation, and the role played in it by the educational system, is seen in the description of the French school in the village: “De la maison familiale on la voyait, détachée, de l’autre côté de la voie ferrée” (p.114) [From the house we could see it, by itself, on the other side of the railroad tracks, p.97]. Thus, in order to reach the French school, the railway lines have to be crossed. Just as, when her mother departs, the railway lines separate her physically from her mother, so too do they separate the village from the school. The school is also described as “detached,” it is not a part of the village, but more connected to the mechanical world of the railway lines, the symbol of a modern technological society.

Bugul is not the only African writer to make use of the image of railway tracks to represent the incursion of Western influence. In a well-known passage in L’Enfant noir the Guinean writer, Camara Laye, has used the same image to suggest an imminent threat to his young protagonist’s secure childhood world. The rails are described as “glitter[ing] cruelly under the fierce sun...,” the adverb “cruelly” suggesting an anthropomorphic quality, one which will encroach insidiously into the narrator’s life, in a way similar to the dangerous snake which is attracted by the warmth of these same rails or the smell of the oil from the tracks and which threatens his life. One particular snake is his father’s guiding spirit and the father tells his son that if he also wants to be visited by the guiding spirit of their race, he will have to spend more and more time in his company. This of course the narrator is unable to do because of his Western education. It is therefore significant that the first danger that the young child is exposed to is that caused by the proximity of Western technology, the very technology which will literally separate him from
his family and the natural world. One sees a parallel movement then in both these autobiographical novels of the effects of colonialism in the form of its assimilationist education policy. In both cases the protagonists' Western education is the cause of their separation from what is suggested by the authors as their “natural” environment, as instanced by Laye’s separation from his father’s totem, the snake, and Ken’s betrayal of the baobab tree, to be discussed later.

Bugul’s commentary on the alienating effects of education is continued in her description of her lessons in the village school, especially apparent in her attempts to learn the French language. The narrator stresses the harsh sounding vowels of the coloniser’s language, signifiers of the mechanical, alien nature of the French educational system, for the vowels are repeated automatically, a necessity in the system of rote learning. Not only does the narrator herself feel a physical onslaught as she repeats the French vowels, that of her cheeks cracking apart and the blood rushing to her head with the force required for the “i” vowel, but even the occupants of the surrounding bush are shown to be afraid, such as the birds and termites. The narrator also describes the baobab trees close to the French school as silent witnesses who would have much to tell later (p.97). The narrator personalises the baobabs as part of the natural African world, and unlike the French educational system, which inhibits speech, the special relationship between the narrator and her baobab is instrumental in enabling her to come to some understanding of her past, as I discuss in the conclusion, thereby enabling discourse as the narrator sets down her story.

While living in Belgium the narrator experiences an increased sense of alienation when she becomes pregnant by a young Belgian and decides to undergo an abortion which appears to compound her sense of loss in relation to her mother. The abortion itself is already a moment of crisis in her life and, although it is also an occasion which gives rise to a feminist consciousness as she waits in the doctor’s surgery surrounded by women of all nationalities, this realisation is not empowering for her. She understands that all women, whatever their nationality or colour, are at the mercy of their bodies’ biological functioning: “[elle se rendait] compte que les femmes, toutes les femmes, avaient le même destin” (p.56) ([she] realized that women, all women, have the same destiny, p.43). Furthermore, the narrator recognises that they are all at
the mercy of the unscrupulous "male" doctor who exploits their situation, in the same way that she was exploited by her teacher, who had seduced her while she was still at school, which she also remembers at this time. While working in Belgium she even conceptualises her earlier forced separation from her mother in terms of either a violent birth or of an abortion itself. The context is ambiguous: "J'avais joué pour fuir la solitude, car elle me ramenait toujours au départ de la mère, celle dont on m'avait arrachée sans me laisser le loisir de sécher le sang qui coulait à flots de mes entrailles" (p.109) [I'd been playing in order to flee from loneliness, for it always took me back to the mother's departure, the woman from whom they'd torn me away without leaving me time to dry the blood that flowed from my entrails, p.93].

One notes here the violence of the imagery, the tearing away of bodily parts and the flowing of blood. However, the image is rather unusual in that it appears to represent the child who is aborting her mother, or is the blood dripping from the child's entrails or womb the result of a violent birth and a signifier of future violence? One wonders, when the narrator herself experiences an abortion, whether she is perhaps repeating the cycle of rejection which she was subjected to? Certainly, there are intimations that she repeats other aspects of her mother's life, as will be explored in the sequel, Cendres et braises.

The narrator's confused emotions about her mother, as well as her rather fragile state of mind generally, are indicated when she attends a Leonard Cohen concert. In a strange, almost surrealistic episode, encapsulating both her isolation and her sense of sexual commodification, she becomes lost and wanders onto the stage. Throughout her time in Europe, Ken often views herself as an object to be consumed by the West, and in this incident literally takes on this role by presenting herself on stage to a Western audience. Moreover, a double alienation operates, for the audience is also "lost" in that they have misread the situation; they believe her appearance to be part of the show: "je fus accueillie par les applaudissements de ces gens qui lorgnaient mes seins sous le voile indien transparent et ne comprenaient pas que je m'étais égarée" (p.110) [I was welcomed with much applause from people who were trying to sneak a look at my breasts through the sheer, transparent Indian fabric I was wearing and who didn't understand that I was lost, p.93-94]. After the show she seeks out a substitute mother figure, her Belgian friend Laure: "Chez Laure. La mère, la coupable, celle que j'aimais, celle que je
désirais parfois et que je rejetais, parce qu'elle me culpabilisait" (p.112) [At Laure's. The mother, the guilty one, the one I loved, the one I sometimes wanted and whom I rejected because she made me feel guilty, p.96]. It is clear here that Bugul's rejection of her mother stems not only from her experiences in the West, but also from deep feelings of betrayal and anger. She considers her mother to be "the guilty one" but she herself feels guilty in her presence, perhaps due to deep feelings of anger and resentment she has never been able to express, separated from her mother not only by physical distance but also by an inability to communicate when she is in her presence. The whole episode, both the concert and her flight to Laure, only serves to underline the protagonist's sense of loss and disorientation.

Perhaps the most extreme example of the narrator's tendency to see herself as a commodity, as well as highlighting her rather ambiguous feelings towards her mother's behaviour, is seen in the ultimate commodification, that of prostitution. In this work, unlike some other novels by African women writers, prostitution results in the protagonist's near disintegration. Bugul's first experience of prostitution, it takes place in the Hilton hotel and causes her to think of her mother. As she reflects on her mother's conduct, there is a suggestion that she considers that her mother was not only not a "good mother," but she was also not a "good wife" and she fears that this moral laxity may be apparent in her own demeanour. She asks herself: "Ma féminité était-elle à ce point aussi visible? Ou bien était-ce le 'ligeey u ndey'?" (p.126) [Was my femininity that visible? Or was it the "ligeey u ndey"? p.107]. The latter is footnoted in the novel, explaining that it means literally "the mother's work" and figuratively or symbolically indicates either the good or bad luck accompanying her child, according to whether the mother had been a good wife or not. In this way the narrator appears to suggest that by leaving her husband, and by extension her daughter, her mother had not been a good wife and that this has caused Ken's own "bad luck." This interpretation is especially valid when one considers the context of this quotation, at the moment that the narrator is about to prostitute herself. It raises the question of whether, if her mother were indeed a "bad wife," she may have left her husband for other reasons besides those of caring for her grandchild, the reason given to Ken for her departure. Whatever the case may be, what is important in the context of the novel, is that Ken herself believes that her mother is responsible for the state she now finds herself in. In fact, after prostituting herself, she believes herself colonised again amongst the group of those "sans
giron de la mère sans lieu pour reposer la tête" (p.128) [[who had] no mother's lap, no place to rest their head, p.109]. These thoughts seem to indicate that she blames her mother for her plight, and she sees herself very much like an orphan, while also intimating in her reference to being part of a "colonised group" that part of her predicament stems from her status as a colonised "other". As she throws herself onto the bed, the warmth of the fur coat [her "payment" from her client] is as soft as "une caresse de mère" (p.128) [a mother's caress, p.109] and it is at this moment that she delves back into her past, in a long flashback. The fact that the payment for prostitution resembles a mother's embrace suggests that the narrator's act of prostitution may be a search for some kind of love and recognition denied her in her relationship with her mother. This interlude in the anonymity of a hotel, on a stranger's bed, wrapped in a mink coat, the latter evoking connotations of commodification and cruelty, is in stark contrast to the earlier scene when Ken remembers the warmth of her mother's body in the bed which she used to share with her as a child. Her memory of the intimacy she shared with her mother at that time is underlined in the use of the personal pronoun "my" to describe her mother in contrast to the generic pronoun "the" used throughout the rest of the novel.

Ma mère, je la sentais tous les soirs, dans le lit que je partageais avec elle. [...] Je me blottissais contre elle, souhaitant ardemment que nous soyons collées pour la vie. Je tenais ses seins qui avaient donné la vie, dans mes petits poings, jusqu'à la réveiller. (pp.79-80)

My mother – in the bed I shared with her I would feel her every night. [...] I snuggled up against her, wishing with all my heart that we would be glued together for life. I would hold her life-giving breasts in my little fists until I would wake her up. (p.65)

In prostituting herself, the narrator almost seems to be performing a form of self-abuse, to be hurt and used, which will culminate in her victim/oppressor love affair in the sequel, Cendres et braises.

It is noticeable that the narrator is constantly searching for an elusive "mother" figure, elusive because unable to replace her biological mother. Indeed, those whom one would have thought to be the most likely to fill the void left in Ken's life when her mother leaves, one of her father's other wives, and her father himself, are unable to do so:
Un an de pleurs et d’amertume. [...] Le vide laissé par le départ de la mère ne se comblait pas. Le père, vieux et entièrement consacré à la prière, ne pouvait pas s’occuper de moi. La première épouse du père ne pouvait pas remplacer la mère. (pp.129-30)

[One year of weeping and bitterness and nobody to console me. [...] The void left by the mother’s departure would not be filled. The father, old and wholly devoted to prayer, couldn’t mind me. The first wife of the father couldn’t replace the mother, pp.111-12].

For a time, one of her male friends, Paul Denoël, appears to take on both parenting roles. When she stays with him and his wife, “Il vérifiait la fermeture des volets, tirait les teintures et parfois il attendait jusqu’à ce que je sois dans le lit; il me bordait et déposait un baiser sur mon front. J’étais comme un enfant et je sentais bien” (p.105) [He’d check whether the shutters were closed, turn down the blankets, and sometimes wait until I was in bed; he’d come over and kiss my forehead. I’d be like a child and it made me feel good, p.89]. However, Ken’s sense of security is fleeting, as, due to an understandable jealousy on the part of his wife, an estrangement in her relationship with Paul ensues. Unfortunately, in this particular mother substitute Ken is unable to enjoy the close physical contact which she remembers sharing with her mother as a child.

Indeed, none of the relationships entered into by Ken provide her with the succour and comfort which she is seeking, and in some cases they are actually harmful. A relationship with a male friend, Jean Vermer, degenerates into violence and foreshadows the abusive relationship she enters into with her French lover in the sequel. Moreover, as suggested by one Jean-Marie Volet:

Parce qu’elle a mal vécu la séparation d’avec la mère, toute sa vie s’oriente vers un impossible paradoxe: la recherche de nouvelles situations lui permettant de rejouer la rupture initiale dont elle a été victime en espérant, de manière illusoire, y porter une nouvelle conclusion.  

[Because she [Ken] had not managed to recover from the separation from her mother, all her life is oriented towards an impossible paradox: the search for new situations which allow her to replay the initial rupture in which she was the victim, mistakenly hoping to bring to it a new conclusion].

At the novel’s close, when Ken returns to Senegal, she discovers that the baobab has died in her absence. What does the death of the baobab symbolise? Ken believes that the baobab has gone mad and died because she did not keep her promise to it to return: “Le rendez-vous manqué lui
avait causé une profonde tristesse. Il devint fou et mourut quelque temps après" (p.181) [The missed date had caused it deep sorrow. It went mad and died shortly thereafter, p.158]. Because Bugul believes that the baobab has died because she did not keep faith with it, a likely reading of this event is that she feels that she has in some way betrayed that African part of herself, symbolised by the baobab, and that its death signifies that such a loss is perhaps irredeemable. Such a reading is reinforced when one considers that, upon the death of her grandmother, Bugul projects her thoughts forward to the time when she discovers the dead baobab, obsessed with guilt because of the lack of closeness in their relationship, mainly due to her grandmother’s disapproval of her attending school. “Moi aussi je refusais la grand-mère; était-ce pour cela que je me retrouvais un jour devant le baobab fou mort depuis longtemps et qui faisait des grimaces au soleil?”(p.140) [And I, in turn, refused [the grandmother]; was that the reason why one day I'd find myself in front of the mad baobab tree again, long since dead, and why it would make faces in the sun?, p.121]. The last lines of the novel are ambiguous:

Sans paroles, je prononçais l’oraison funèbre de ce baobab témoin et complice du départ de la mère, le premier matin d’une aube sans crépuscule. Longtemps, je restai là devant ce tronc mort, sans pensée. (p.182)

[Wordlessly, I pronounced the eulogy of the baobab tree that had been witness to and accomplice in the mother’s departure, the first morning of a dawn without dusk. I stayed there in front of the dead trunk for a long time, without a thought, p.159].

If the baobab could be regarded as synonymous with Africa (in Bugul’s thoughts of Africa the baobab nearly always figures), then the protagonist could be laying the blame on traditional African society for her mother’s departure and her resulting madness, especially as she describes the baobab as “complicit” in her mother’s departure. Thus, Ken’s feelings of abandonment are displaced on to the baobab which she views as synonymous of African society. However it is Ken’s attendance at a colonial school which is the reason stated by her mother for not letting her daughter accompany her. The distress experienced by Ken at her mother’s departure is compounded by the fact that she perceives her mother to be “irreplaceable,” all of her relationships with other people unable to fill the void created by her mother’s loss. It is unclear at the end of the novel whether Bugul becomes reconciled to this loss or if she can be reconciled with Africa.
The sequel, *Cendres et braises*, reveals that in fact the protagonist does not remain in her country and does not, at least initially, reach a state of emotional equilibrium. In the interview already mentioned, Bugul refers to this sequel, telling Magnier that she had already started writing it and that it, also, was autobiographical. *Cendres et braises* is very similar to *Le Baobab fou* both in structure and in the psychological breakdown of its heroine, as it tells of the narrator's second journey to Europe, this time to Paris, accompanied by her French lover, and of the disintegration of their relationship. In fact, just as in *Le Baobab fou* Ken's life seems to spiral out of control into a life of drugs and prostitution, in its sequel, she seems incapable of leaving an abusive relationship, where she is subjected to increasing violence from her jealous lover. Thus, the narrator's attempts to find happiness in a love affair during this second journey to Europe are as futile as her attempts to fulfil herself through education, the purpose of her first journey. Moreover, just as in *Le Baobab fou* the narrator's education isolates her from her family, in the sequel her relationship with her lover clearly furthers this process. While living with her lover in Paris, they make only one return visit to her own country for her lover's business interests, but she spends most of this time in their hotel room, afraid that her mother will learn of their affair.

The narration of *Cendres et braises* opens with a sense of well-being on the part of the narrator to be back finally in her own environment, but the reader is soon alerted to the fact that the moment in time described does not refer to the return to Africa evoked at the conclusion of *Le Baobab fou*, but is the return from a subsequent journey to Europe, described in flashback. Another dissimilarity between the two works is the naming of the narrator as Marie, rather than Ken, although the former pseudonym is still based on the author's own name. Nevertheless, *Cendres et braises* is similar to its predecessor in many respects. It is also told retrospectively by a narrator who has now returned to Africa. The principal reason for her flight from Europe is
her desire to finally reconcile her ambiguous feelings towards her mother: “Je cherchais la Mère avant tout. C'était elle qui me manquait. C'était ainsi que j'avais quitté la ville pour retourner au village”(p.107) [My main aim was to look for the Mother. She was the one I missed. That was the reason why I had left town and returned to the village]. Moreover, Cendres et braises continues Ken/Marie’s search for a sense of belonging, which persists in eluding her, at least initially, as she only socialises with other returnees, so that feelings of alienation to her own culture continue. Most of her time is spent living with her older brother and his wife, but the lack of closeness which she experienced in their relationship in the earlier novel persists here.

The closest she comes to a female confidante is Anta Seye, a young wife who lives near to her mother’s home. She is the person to whom she confides her story of her second flight to Europe. It is noticeable, however, that Anta Sèye is what may be considered an unwilling interlocutor or recipient of her story, constantly excusing her absence to the narrator. Ken/Marie implies, however, that the identity of her listener is of no importance to her: “Je ne savais plus si je la [l’histoire] racontais à Anta Sèye qui était peut-être partie ou à moi-même ou à un auditeur invisible ou à l’environnement ou aux objets”(p.41) [I no longer knew if I was recounting it [the story] to Anta Sèye who had perhaps left, or to myself, or to an invisible listener, or to empty space or to objects]. Just as Bugul confided in her interview with Magnier that writing Le Baobab fou was therapeutic because “Je ne pouvais me confier à personne alors j’ai mis tout cela sur du papier”66 [I wasn’t able to confide in anyone so I wrote it all down], so it is evident, in her feelings of indifference as to whether Anta Sève is present to hear her story or not, that the narrator’s reasons for telling her story are still primarily therapeutic.

Just as the few female friends described in Le Baobab fou do not provide her with the stability of a sustaining relationship, there is even less indication of female solidarity in Cendres et braises and the friendships Ken/Marie makes later in the novel are sketchy and seem to be strategically planned for possible escape routes from her lover’s violence. One of the women she becomes friendly with in Paris enters her life at a time when she is attempting to become independent from her lover, and find herself a job. However, her comment, “Je découvris la solidarité entre femmes par elle et ses amies”(p.183) [I discovered solidarity between women
through her and her friends] seems little more than a slogan, particularly as these relationships do not form part of the narrative. Rather than a criticism of the novel’s structure, however, this one-dimensional aspect of the novel might be viewed as a narrative ploy to suggest how the narrator is totally consumed in her love affair.

Moreover, Ken/Marie is still unable to form any sort of *rapprochement* with her mother, even when the latter visits her in hospital after she has been taken ill. The occasion provides her with an opportunity to reflect upon the hurt she experienced at the moment of her mother’s departure. She then remembers a later event which she considers to be another example of her mother’s betrayal. This concerns an incident when the young narrator supposedly pushes her niece over, causing her to fall and injure herself. Despite Ken’s protestations of innocence, her mother does not believe her. Ken appears to view such a lack of faith on her mother’s part as an emotional betrayal, compounding the hurt she experienced as a result of her physical desertion. This is heightened by the fact that the person her mother has left her to look after is the same niece involved in this incident. Twenty years later this episode is still strong in the narrator’s memory, as is the hurt she feels that her own mother had not wanted to take her side in the matter: “*J’en avais voulu à la Mère en qui je ne trouvais pas la personne première avec qui je pouvais sceller un pacte de confiance. / La Mère ne me faisait pas confiance: où la trouverais-je cette confiance?*”(p.49) [I had been annoyed with the Mother because she was not my most trusted confidante. / The Mother didn’t trust me: where would I find this trust?]. Although her mother is beside her, praying fervently for her recovery, she is unable to ask her whether she still believes her to have been the cause of the other child’s fall. It is only in an interior monologue that she is able to do so and in this way receive the support she needs. Lying on her hospital bed and looking at her mother, she wonders why she is still unable to communicate with her and tell her everything which has happened to her since that time.

Juxtaposed to this incident of incommunicability with her mother is a description of the narrator’s reaction to a patient dying next to her in the recovery ward. In spite of the nurse’s declarations that nothing can be done for him, Ken/Marie attempts to make the dying man as comfortable as possible. In this way Bugul underlines the paradox whereby the narrator is able
to reach out to a complete stranger, but is unable to do so to her own mother. Her alienation from her mother is revealed starkly in the following paragraph:

\[ Je \text{ regardeais la Mère toujours à la dérobée. Je n'ai jamais osé la regarder vraiment. / Ah Dieu! en face de celle qui m'avais mise au monde je me sentais comme une étrangère. / Où connaîtrais-je cette complicité affective, ce réconfort, cette sécurité, cette présence unique? (p.108). } \]

[I always used to watch the Mother without being seen. I have never dared to look at her properly. / Oh God! In the presence of the person who had brought me into the world I felt like a stranger. / Where would I find this loving complicity, this comfort, this security, this unique presence?].

She admits to herself that this distance between them is her fault in that she did not feel able to adapt herself to her mother, who “[I]’aimait en sensations, en suggestions, en silence”(p.109) [loved [her] in sensations, in suggestions, in silence].

This view of the mother is still very much in the traditional mode. Perhaps the most telling detail in Bugul’s description is the way in which she describes her mother as loving her “silently.” This seems to be at the heart of the problem between them. Her mother is silent, perhaps by custom and tradition, although in the intimacy of the home such conduct would appear to be rather unusual. The mother’s incommunicability is also referred to at another point in the novel: “Personne ne m’avait posé de questions depuis mon arrivée, même pas la Mère. / La Mère ne posait pas de questions”(p.34) [Nobody had asked me any questions since my arrival, not even the Mother. / The Mother didn’t ask questions]. In this instance the narrator is again underlining her mother’s silent, submissive role, but what is suggested in this citation is indifference, not only on the part of her mother, but the wider community, to her activities abroad. Unfortunately her mother’s silence has the effect of also rendering the narrator voiceless in her mother’s presence. It is only in writing that she achieves the freedom to explore her own feelings.

The description of the narrator’s mother in the previous paragraph is reminiscent of the type of description of female protagonists - silent, submissive and all-suffering - used by African male writers in the anglophone tradition, especially in their early novels, for example Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Ken/Marie’s depiction of her mother as all-suffering is seen in the
following citation: “Ah! la Mère, elle acceptait tout” (p.9) [Oh! the Mother, she would accept everything]. Moreover, this kind of description is also applicable to writing by some African male writers in the francophone area, particularly those writing in the Negritude tradition.68 I discussed the use of the Mother Africa trope in the previous chapter. Bugul’s usage of this trope appears to endorse a vision of woman who is primarily a Mother, but who has about her a timeless essence, as described by the Negritude poets.

Before continuing this discussion of Bugul’s appropriation of certain aspects of this tradition as it is reflected in literature, it is perhaps worthwhile reiterating some of the major tropes of Negritude writing. An explanation of the meaning of the term Negritude may be sought in the essays of Léopold Sédar Senghor, one of the founding members of the Negritude movement.69 Senghor envisions Negritude as being the composite expression of the black world:

Negritude is the whole of the values of civilization – cultural, economical, social, political – which characterizes black people. It is essential instinctive reason, which pervades all these values. In other terms, the sense of communication, the gift of imagination, the gift of rhythm – these are the traits of Negritude, that we find like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the black man.70

The criticism of Negritude – especially its tendency to engage in a Western binary thought system – is well-known and it is not my intention to add to it. What is interesting is various women authors’ desire to insert Negritude tropes in their work in view of the essentialising categories involved. Although the use of Negritude tropes are particularly apparent in Bugul’s Cendres et Braises, she also uses this technique in her previous work. For example, in Le Baobab fou Ken refers to the mother of the family who come to settle in the region after the fire has devastated the area, as “l’éternelle mère, source jamais tarie, l’indispensable femme sans qui la vie ne serait pas” (p.19) [The eternal mother, the spring that never dries, the dispensable woman without whom life would not be, p.12]. This description is of a generic mother, the origin of all life, and her identity is thus reduced to her biological function.71 An early description of the narrator’s mother in Cendres et braises is very similar: “Ah, la Mère, la créature la plus extraordinaire, le sentiment, le sang, la source!” (p.7) [Oh, the Mother, the most extraordinary creature, feeling, bloodline, source!]. Not only is she the source of all life, but she is a preserver of life. The narrator extends the mother’s concern that her child should eat
properly to a more general or widespread desire, almost an inherent ability, to prevent starvation
on a large scale, “Ce sentiment qui aurait empêché toute famine et toute misère, il n’y avait que
la Mère qui l’assumait entièrement jusqu’au bout de ses forces”(p.9) [This feeling which would
have prevented all famines and all poverty, it was only the Mother who could have taken on
such a task so completely until she had no strength left]. Such behaviour on the part of the
Mother appears instinctive. Hers is a generous nature: “Le plaisir et la nostalgie. Comme la
Mère se donnait. Elle était comme rétablie dans l’instinct”(p.11) [Pleasure and nostalgia. How
the Mother gave of herself. It was as if she were restored to the world of instinct]. The mother
as pure instinct is yet another Negritude trope which is also associated with an aptitude or ability
for rhythmic movement, when Ken/Marie alludes to how gracefully her mother moves: “La
mère était rythme même”(p.10) [The mother was the very essence of rhythm].

The narrator’s descriptions of her Mother tend towards what may be considered an “unrealistic”
portrayal of a living, breathing, autonomous individual. This lack of realism is exacerbated
when she wonders how old her Mother must be:

La voir ainsi me rapprochait encore plus d’elle. Cette impression que la Mère était un
symbole, faisait que je ne la situais pas dans le temps. / Je ne la considérais pas comme un être
temporel. / La Mère ne pouvait pas avoir d’âge. / La Mère, elle était la Mère. Rien d’autre.
(p.13)

[Seeing her like this brought me closer to her. This impression that the Mother was a symbol,
meant that I didn’t situate her in time. / I did not consider her as a temporal being. The Mother
was ageless. / The Mother was the Mother. Nothing else].

Despite the fact that the narrator professes to feel closer to her mother at this moment, the latter
is described as a symbol, rather than a flesh and blood person, heightened by the description of
her mother as timeless. At one point in the novel she even refers to her as “divine”(p.15).

Ironically, it is in her relationship with the Marabout, a supposedly more “divine” being through
his role as a spiritual adviser, that the narrator seems to have finally discovered someone in
whom she can confide: “Le Marabout me permit de me dévoiler, de m’expliquer, de parler de
tout un cheminement intérieur que j’étais seule à vivre”(p.113) [The Marabout permitted me to
reveal myself, to explain myself, to talk about all those personal feelings that I was experiencing
on my own]. He possesses the gifts of a healer and a mediator, qualities particularly appealing to
someone in the narrator's situation, recovering from an abusive relationship, qualities which are the antithesis of those of her former lover. Moreover, unlike her lover, who had separated her from her mother's sphere of influence, the Marabout serves as an intermediary between them: “En arrivant au village, je ne pensais pas retrouver le Marabout, je pensais retrouver la Mère. Il me permit de la retrouver, de la découvrir, de l'aimer, de la reconnaître” (p.113) [When I arrived in the village, I didn't expect to get to know the Marabout again, I thought I would get to know my Mother. He allowed me to find her again, to discover her, to love her, to recognise her]. However, we realise that up to the close of the novel, this has not happened: it is especially apparent in the way that the news of the narrator's prospective marriage to the Marabout is announced. The last sentence of the novel informs the reader that: “Ma Mère vient d'apprendre par la Mauresque et sa voisine que le Marabout m'avait épousée. / Mille Gloires Au Créateur des Harmonies Eternelles” (p.190) [My mother has just learnt from the Moorish woman and her neighbour that the Marabout had married me. A Thousand Glories to the Creator of Eternal Harmonies]. Thus, Ken/Marie does not impart this vital information to her mother personally. The latter must hear the news of her daughter's marriage from an outside source, underlining that the mother and daughter are still estranged. However, it is noticeable that in the last quotation the narrator finally refers to her mother as “my Mother” rather than “the Mother,” which does suggest some sort of reconciliation. This was also a feature of Bugul's first work. In fact, in an interview, when Bugul was asked why, in Le Baobab fou, she alluded to people she met in Belgium with the possessive adjective, for example “my Jean-François” whereas she refers to members of her family as “the father,” “the mother” and “the brother,” she responded that her relationships with friends were ones that she freely chose, that were not imposed upon her. Furthermore, she admitted that: “Mes relations en Europe sont des liens qui reposent sur une certaine affinité, ce qui n'a jamais été le cas avec “la Mère”.” [My relationships in Europe are based on ties which reflect a certain affinity, which has never been the case with “the Mother”].

How can one read the conclusion of Cendres et braises? It is an ambivalent ending because, although the narrator is still unable to achieve a close and loving relationship with her mother, she nevertheless assumes certain aspects of her mother's behaviour. Not only does she take on her mother's religion, she marries a religious man, a Marabout, just as her mother has done.
before her. It may be possible to deduce from these circumstances that she has, if one accepts
the premise of an Œdipal reading, sought a relationship in which the Marabout replaces her
father in her affections. Finally, not only is the mother identified with “stasis” (a state in which
there is no action or progress) in all of Ken/Marie’s descriptions, but she herself would appear
to wish to adopt an identical role when she assumes a similar lifestyle to that of her mother.
Perhaps the novel’s title is relevant here, “Ashes and Embers” which refers to the mother’s habit
of keeping a fire lit. Under the embers, the fire is still dormant, alive, and it is this unknown,
hidden part of her mother that the narrator wishes to discover, but just as the embers inevitably
turn into ashes, so is Ken’s relationship with her mother also doomed to failure.

The discussion of the depiction of Ken/Marie’s mother in Negritude terms raises the question of
the portrayal of women by writers in the Negritude tradition. The reference to the “ashes”
contained in Bugul’s title is reminiscent of Christopher Miller’s commentary on Senghor’s
famous poem, “Femme noire” [Black Woman] which extols the attributes of black female
beauty. The last two lines of Senghor’s poem read thus: “Je chante ta beauté qui passe, forme
que je fixe dans l’Éternel / Avant que le Destin jaloux te réduise en cendres pour / nourrir les
racines de la vie” [I sing of your fleeting beauty, a form that I affix in the Eternal / Before
jealous Destiny reduces you to ashes / To feed the roots of life]. According to Miller, in its
reference to the Black Woman’s disintegration into ashes, the poem “promot[es] the woman to
eternal status while at the same time reducing her to fertilizer for future generations of poets.”

According to Miller:

‘Femme noire’ shows how francophone literacy constantly “talks” about women and depends
on women for allegorical fuel but excludes women from the process of literate creation. The
silence of Senghor’s black woman – for us, with the advantage of hindsight – therefore stands
as a figure of women’s exclusion from francophone literacy. Miller is careful to point out that Senghor was not thinking about gender equality. Although he
concedes that Senghor’s aim was to use “the female figure to serve the end of racial
equality”(p.259) he believes that this “first things first” approach, where certain forms of
liberation are considered more important than others (for example, national liberation before
gender equality, referred to in the last chapter), has been discredited: “As historical observation
this is necessary, but [not] as an ethical stance.” Miller describes the Black Woman of the
poem as “a woman who exists on paper and who is spoken for rather than speaking.” Other critics agree with Miller’s description of the Black Woman in Senghor’s poem as eternal and lacking in agency. However, as Senghor himself has commented, it was necessary to correct those images which denigrated the Black woman and emanated from the West, and to present instead an image more attuned to the Black person’s vision.

In my analysis of Bugul’s adoption of certain traits of Negritude, how do my remarks concerning Miller’s reception of Senghor’s poem affect my own thoughts on Bugul’s work? Although the description of Bugul’s mother is as primarily silent, even though the reader is not privy to the mother’s subjectivity, s/he is privy to the writer/daughter’s subjectivity and her literary creation. Indeed, Bugul continues in the tradition of the earlier Senegalese women novelists Miller discusses, such as Mariama Bâ. Just as Miller believes that Bâ has confidence in the “healing and redeeming” powers of literature, so too does Bugul believe in its therapeutic qualities.

*C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée – Mother as absence*

Many of Calixthe Beyala’s novels trace the mother/daughter relationship, but this relationship is, more often than not, problematic. This is particularly so with regard to her first two novels, *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée,* discussed in this chapter, and *Tu t'appelleras Tanga,* discussed in the following chapter with regard to the forced excision the daughter undergoes at the behest of her mother. Beyala’s *Soleil* is similar to Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou* in that the protagonist, Ateba Léocadie, has also been abandoned by her mother, Betty, when she was a young girl. Unlike Bugul’s two novels, however, there is no chance of a reconciliation, as the mother does not return. Betty is a prostitute who runs off with one of her lovers, but her daughter has never ceased to think of her, and her aunt, with whom she is left, is as inept as a mother as was Betty. There is little plot in this almost hallucinogenic novel which concerns Ateba’s attempts to come to terms with the loss of her mother, her relationship with the opposite sex and her search for her own identity as a woman.
In *Soleil* the exploration of Ateba’s search for her identity as a woman is linked to the mother/daughter thematics in the novel, as Ateba bases such a quest on her desire to know more about her mother, perhaps to try to understand why she has deserted her, but also to give her guidance as to her own conduct as a woman. In an interview Beyala has commented on the importance of the woman question in her work: “*Le lien entre mes différents romans est constitué par les problèmes essentiels de la femme dans la société.*”

Moreover, concerning her interest in this question, she has remarked: “*la femme africaine a trois types de combats. D’abord elle doit se battre en tant que femme. Ensuite, elle doit s’imposer en tant que femme noire. Enfin, elle doit se battre pour son intégration.*”

All these aspects of Beyala’s conviction are relevant to the mother/daughter relationship in *Soleil*. As a woman, the protagonist, Ateba, is oppressed in a world of men, first of all by her mother’s lovers, then her aunt Ada’s lovers, and finally the men she meets who regard her as a prostitute. As a black woman, she must face the problems arising specifically from her culture, such as the difficulties of living in harsh poverty and abjection in a post-independent urban slum. Moreover, the strictly defined roles of men and women in such a society where a woman is valued solely for her adherence to tradition, results in a life of no fulfilment for her. The extreme poverty in which the family lives accounts for her mother’s series of lovers and her decision to abandon her young daughter, and also explains her aunt’s similar lifestyle. With regard to the fight for a woman’s integration, Beyala describes above all the alienation and isolation felt by her heroine, illustrated in the double narrative voice operating in the novel, as well as her disintegration, in her many allusions to madness and her own breakdown, principally as a result of her mother’s desertion of her. However, Beyala’s novel may be considered to end on a hopeful note, as she describes how Ateba’s dreams of female solidarity and her act of writing letters aid her growing confidence in her own ability to face up to oppression.
The title of the novel, “C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée,” derives from the Song of Solomon and the biblical verses relating to this, which are spoken by Solomon’s wife, are cited in the “preface” to the novel:

Je suis noire et pourtant belle, filles de Jérusalem [...] 
[...] Ne prenez pas garde à mon teint basané: c’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée. Les fils de ma mère se sont emportés contre moi, ils m’ont mise à garder les vignes. Ma vigne à moi, je ne l’avais pas gardée!

Le Cantique des Cantiques
Premier poème

[I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem... 
... Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me: my mother’s children were angry with me; they made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept]

The Song of Songs
Chapter 1

This preface raises many questions, not least the fact that the words of the Song of Solomon are also cited by the Caribbean writer Aimé Césaire, in his Cahier d’un retour au pays natal where he deals in a sarcastic manner with the way in which certain blacks represent themselves: “je ne suis pas différent de vous; ne faites pas attention à ma peau noire: c’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée” [I am no different to you; don’t pay attention to my black skin: it is the sun which has burnt me]. The title chosen by Beyala has some interesting connotations which she exploits with regard to both subject matter and characterisation in her novel. In an allegorical reading of the Song of Solomon the bride is representative of sinful humanity, the human church, which will be forgiven through the divine love of Christ. Another reading derives from a Middle Eastern origin where blackness of the skin is equally derogatory, because it is associated with menial work.

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Beyala's allusion to the *Song of Solomon* stresses both the notion of woman as inferior as well as the notion of blackness as inferior. If we look closely at the citation from the first book of the *Song of Solomon* quoted above, the Bride, in affirming her beauty, feels that she needs to qualify her statement in her use of the adverb "but." In this way she is involuntarily complicit with her persecutors.\(^8^5\) Perhaps Beyala, in citing these words, wishes to identify the suffering of her protagonist to that undergone by Solomon's Bride. Certainly, Ateba allows herself to be victimised in the first part of the novel, but she is also proud and defiant in her own destiny as a woman. Moreover, Solomon's Bride's recognition that she has not "kept her own vineyard" is reflected upon also by Ateba when she considers the generations of women of her family who have not realised their own potential. Thinking about her mother, Betty, and her aunt, Ada, she realises that: "Toute leur vie, elles ont dansé pour des hommes [...] Jamais, elles n'avaient tangué pour elles, et même l'idée de le faire n'avait jamais effleuré leur esprit" (p.140) [Their whole life they danced for men [...] Never would they swirl around for themselves, the idea had never even crossed their mind, p.95]. Although Ateba is here talking in a literal sense, nevertheless her analogy to women's lack of control over their own destiny is evident. Moreover, the context of the dancing is the funerary sacrifice for Ekassi, a local woman who, as a young woman has slept with a policeman in order to secure her boyfriend's release from jail. Immediately after his release, he abandons her, not understanding that she has "sacrificed" herself for him. Subsequent to this she becomes a prostitute. The analogy is clear; women are not concerned enough about their own self-fulfilment. They pin their hopes on the destinies of men, and are subsequently disappointed.

Beyala's choice of title also evokes a questioning of the internalisation of some African women's adoption of a norm of beauty which may be considered more "European." It is a subject that she explores in some of her other novels, as do other African women writers.\(^8^6\) In *Soleil*, however, Beyala only mentions the phenomenon of black women's attempts to lighten their skin with various products, but it serves to remind the protagonist of her mother, Betty, who had also subscribed to this practice:

*Ambi. Ce mot a une résonance familière. Elle a neuf ans. C'est le matin. Betty est dans son bain. Ateba lui frotte le dos. Elle enlève les morceaux de peau morte qui font comme du chewing-gum dans sa main. Une autre peau apparait, neuve, d'un rouge jaunâtre, comme celle*
Beyala’s choice of title also encapsulates the main theme of the novel, notably, women’s oppression and victimisation. Indeed, the title is also indicative of the cosmological and light imagery inherent in the novel. Further, it is very possible that the “sun” of the title may symbolise generic man in the novel as he is the major oppressive factor in the lives of the various women. In this regard it is noticeable that Jean Zepp, who is Ateba’s antagonist and her potential lover, is linked to “light” from the bedroom which he occupies in Ada’s house: “La chambre ‘lumière’ comme on l’appelle pompeusement est la pièce la plus claire de la maison” (p.6). To further expand upon the significance of this symbolic cosmology, woman in the novel is, conversely, linked to the stars and the moon. In the myth which Ateba cites following Irène’s death, woman is a star which descends on to the earth. According to Ateba, woman was a star brightly sparkling in the sky, both day and night until she took pity on man who was suffering on earth and she therefore came down from the sky to bring him love and light. Deciding that it was time to return to her place in the heavens she finds herself betrayed by man who has stolen her containers of light and encircled her house with an iron cordon so that she is unable to leave. “Elle pleura pendant sept jours et sept nuits et ses larmes formèrent la mer, les rivières, les marigots et les lacs” (p.167) [She wept for seven days and seven nights and her tears formed the sea, the rivers, the watering holes, and the lakes, p.114]. What is striking in this feminist version of the creation of the world is man’s cruelty and deceit in comparison to the generosity of spirit of the woman. As suggested by Richard Bjornson, “Ateba’s point is that the consciousness of women originated in a state of harmony and must be liberated from its present bondage to fulfil its joyful destiny.” The myth described replaces the biblical account of the world’s origin where woman is presented as the guilty partner. In addition, this feminist myth
shows woman as the first person to be created, followed by man, the opposite of the biblical
version, where Eve is created out of one of Adam’s ribs. Moreover, there are reminders in
*Soleil* of the biblical myth, in the portrait of Eve shown to Ateba by a young man who is about
to try and seduce her, that of the sinful woman Eve underneath an apple tree (p.100). Ironically,
the young man declares to Ateba as he shows her the portrait that he likes its beauty and grace.
This facile admiration translates into a desire on his part to equalise beauty and grace with the
notion of original sin as it is attributed to woman. However, in another scene, it is clear that the
narrator rejects the image of the woman as the origin of sin, as seen through the words used by
Ateba to describe her mother Betty, whose face, even after her nights of debauchery “*prenait,
dans ces gestes du réveil, la pureté de la femme originelle*”(p.93) [took on the purity of the
original woman, p.60].

Ateba is linked both to the stars, in her recounting of the above myth, and to the moon, as is
seen in her musing to Ada:

*Elle parle peu, et quand elle parle, elle dit des choses au sens incertain. Elle lui dit qu’elle
aime la lune, que la lune a le goût du miel et la fraîcheur de l’aube. Elle lui dit que si
quelquefois la lune se laissait surprendre par le soleil, c’était parce qu’elle se perdait de vue à
rêver d’ailleurs, à souvent rêver d’ailleurs alors qu’elle était l’ailleurs.* (p.154)

[She says little and when she speaks she says things of which the meaning is vague. She tells
her she loves the moon, that the moon tastes like honey and is as fresh as the dawn. She tells
her that if the moon sometimes allowed herself to be surprised by the sun, it was because she’d
lose sight of herself by dreaming of elsewhere, by frequently dreaming of elsewhere even
though she herself is that elsewhere, p.105].

Here the reference to letting herself be surprised by the sun may refer to her short
unconsummated relationship with Jean Zepp, who seems to be linked to the “sun.” The last
sentence would seem to suggest that this is a momentary aberration and that her salvation lies in
herself. Moreover, Ateba, ruminating on why she cannot bring herself to accept Zepp’s
ouvertures of friendship, realises the impossibility of a union between man and woman and
conceptualises this thought in cosmic images: “*Mais pourquoi les étoiles qui déchirent le ciel ne
s’unissent-elles pas au soleil?*” *Pourquoi l’aube ne s’associe-t-elle pas au crépuscule? [...] Il
n’avouera plus qu’il n’a jamais voulu s’unir au rêve de la femme, mais plutôt à sa chair”*(p.64–
5) [But why do the stars that pierce the sky not unite with the sun? Why doesn’t dawn join with
dusk? [...] He will no longer admit he never wanted to join in with woman’s dream, but rather with her flesh, p.39].

In her use of imagery associated with the moon Ateba evokes other female characters, notably the memory of both her grandmother and mother. She reminisces fondly about precious times spent with her grandmother, when she was made to feel special and safe. She recollects the stories her grandmother used to tell her: “Certains soirs, avec la lune en veilleuse, elle rassemblait autour d’elle les enfants du quartier.” (p.35) [Some nights, with the moon watching over them, she’d gather the children of the neighbourhood around her, p.17]. Ateba also associates Betty with the moon. When the latter is about to fall asleep, Ateba is happy imagining that the men with whom Betty had slept “n’avaient pas d’yeux, qu’ils partaient trop tôt, qu’ils ne voyaient pas la lune déséret la terre” (p.105) [had no eyes, that they always left too soon, that they didn’t see the moon desert the earth, p.69]. Instead Ateba relishes those precious moments alone with her mother as she is about to drift into sleep.

How does recapitulation and exploration of the light and cosmic imagery in Soleil aid us to understand the mother/daughter relationship? The fact that the narrator tends, as I have suggested, to discuss her male and female protagonists in these terms may be read in similar terms to the Negritude trope raised in relation to Bugul’s work. Just as the Negritude school associated the Black woman in its poetry with Mother Africa, and therefore in a way proceeded to confine them in their biological roles, so too does Beyala essentialise her protagonists, especially the women characters. According to A Dictionary of Symbols, heat from the sun can be compared to the masculine principle and the pale and delicate nature of the lunar light with its relationship to the waters of the ocean and a woman’s biological rhythm, can be classed as feminine. Even physically, the moon fills the passive role of reflecting the light that the sun diffuses actively. Less metaphorically, more concretely, the passive and subjugated role of woman is a consequence of her social and economic dependency, as well as the centuries of oppression suffered in a patriarchal society whose sense of inferiority she has interiorised.

However, Ateba refuses to be confined to her ordained role. Like her mother Betty before her, she desires to break free from the subjugated role imposed upon her by a traditional society:
“Partout, elle se heurte aux écueils de la tradition. Partout, ils s’amontissent, bouchant la vue, obstruant la gorge, éraflant la main timidement tendue vers la lumière” (p.87) [Everywhere she runs into the stumbling blocks of tradition. Everywhere they accumulate, obstructing the view, clogging her throat, scratching the hand so shyly stretched out towards the light, p.56]. Ateba’s disturbed state of mind as a result of this interior struggle is reflected in the unusual narrative technique of the novel, which consists of a double narrative voice and which mirrors Ateba’s sense of fragmentation. The second omniscient narrative voice, closely identified with Ateba, is referred to as many different entities in the novel, such as a spirit or a soul. It has even been suggested that this second voice represents, in part, the spirit of Betty, her mother. The nature of this identity, impossible to determine, is nevertheless significant. It facilitates the reader’s access to Ateba’s feelings and internal dilemmas, but to achieve this, a first person narration or a simple omniscient narrator would suffice. Perhaps the reason for this unusual narrative approach is to be found in the character of Ateba herself and in the problem which Beyala is attempting to explore, that of a woman who appears to be torn between her own desires and those of the society in which she lives. For example, the only way that Ateba is able to cope with her aunt’s callous behaviour is by retreating into the world of her imagination and by role playing, which seems to be a safeguard against a sense of encroaching madness. Thus, although she plays the role of an obedient daughter “en son dedans, naissent d’autres discours qu’elle s’acharne à garder par peur d’Ada, des autres et surtout d’elle-même [...] puisque la folie l’appelle... Elle construit des barrages pour l’endiguer” (p.38) [deep inside herself other words are being born which she fiercely holds in out of fear of Ada, of others and above all of herself [...] since madness is calling her... She constructs dams to contain it, p.19]. The heartache undergone by Ateba after having “s’est perdue de vue à trop jouer la farce” (p.149) [lost sight of herself through having played the farce too long, p.101] symbolises the difficulty she feels in discovering her own identity, which she is searching for throughout the length of the novel.

Thus, the unidentified narrator who comments, questions, and attempts to sway Ateba, highlights her constant internal quest. Moreover, the double narrative voice suggests a very important theme, the dichotomy between the “self” and the “other” in relation to the way men and women perceive themselves and the opposite sex. Simone de Beauvoir had already explored this same idea more than fifty years ago by asking why woman is the second sex, or
why the “Other.” In her introduction to *The Second Sex* she proclaims: “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.” According to Beauvoir biological, psychological and economic reasons are not enough to explain woman’s oppression. Ontological explanations must also be sought. Hélène Cixous has also shown this tendency to wish to escape from the restrictive binary concepts of traditional Western thought. In her essay “Sorties” she lists several binary opposites, such as man/woman, sun/moon, day/night, culture/nature and activity/passivity. According to her, all these dichotomies find their inspiration in the fundamental dichotomy, man/woman, according to which man is associated with all of the positive connotations and woman with all of the negative ones, notably man is the “self” and woman is his “other.” By the novel’s end Ateba’s “escape” is a result of such a dichotomous philosophy when she creates a new world, forever separate from the world of men.

Ateba’s desire to recall her mother’s memory is due to her longing to recreate a time when the two of them have spent time together and where she has felt a special intimacy between them. That she wishes to create a world without men is understandable in terms of this desire, for it is the presence of men in her mother’s life which takes away precious moments from time spent together with her. In order to evoke her mother’s presence Ateba spends time looking for mementos of her mother:


[Ateba is rummaging. In cupboards. Drawers. Trunks. To crack the wall of the past. To shred the memory. To find her present once again, confused and fragmented by the endless talk. To find Betty again... Betty... To see into the woman [...] To find the signs again. To retrace the chapters of a life. To find Betty again. Her smells. Her tastes. Her wishes. To catalogue the woman so as to find herself [...] To find her own elsewhere hidden in Betty’s secrets, p.56].

It is evident in the above quotation that Ateba needs to come to some sense of acceptance of Betty’s disappearance before she herself can be fully integrated as a whole person. In this extract there are constant repetitions of verbal phrases, especially those including the verb “To find,” emphasising Ateba’s acute need to rediscover her mother. Also noticeable is Ateba’s need “to catalogue” her mother’s life so as to locate herself, suggesting her need for some kind
of certainty and order as she is faced only with Betty's secrets. Cupboards, drawers and trunks are the symbols of such secrets which are shut away, and verbs of violence such as "cut" and "shred" are needed to attempt to uncover her mother's secret past. The persistent repetition of verbal forms, which gives the passage a disjointed tone, emphasises Ateba's agitated state of mind and ceaseless questing.

Ateba eventually discovers a series of photographs. The first one is of her mother dressed in white and clasping a rosary, at the time of her first communion. The following one is dated 1961 and captures Betty rather innocuously sitting on a bench, gazing only as far as the house opposite, but in 1966 Betty is dressed in a "mini-robe rouge, hissée sur dix centimètres de talon, bouche fardée, teint jaune" (pp.88-89) [red minidress, hoisted up on three-inch heels, her mouth painted, a yellow complexion, p.57]. The transition described by the photographs traces the life of a young, innocent girl to that of a young woman whose future seems restricted, as suggested by her limited vision in the photograph, to a rather sad representation of a woman who is in the process of prostituting herself. In the first photograph there is an image of a crucifix, an icon of a religion which incorporates the suggestion of an innocence which already contains the notion of original sin. Moreover, the sense of betrayal of one's own cultural roots, already apparent in the emblem of Christianity, is also present in the final photograph, where Betty's yellow skin suggests the attempts she has made to lighten it.

Ateba's search for her mother, and anything connected with her, evidently betrays her need to form some sense of self-identity. It is as if she needs to comprehend all there is to know about Betty, and especially her reasons for leaving her, before she can achieve this goal. Ateba wishes to resemble Betty and dress up in her clothes and wear make-up. She even imagines that in a certain way "[e]lle était Betty. Elle lui ressemblait physiquement et elle se plaisait à imaginer que sa vie n'était qu'un prolongement de celle de Betty" (p.82) [she was Betty. Physically she looked like her and she enjoyed imagining that her life would be nothing other than a continuation of Betty's, p.52]. In searching in vain for so long for her mother, she appears to take on her very identity: "C'est elle, la femme présente dans sa voix, dans ses yeux et ses pas" (p.115) [It is her - the woman who is present in her voice, in her eyes, and in her steps, p.77]. In this passage the narrator identifies Ateba with her mother. It is as if, because she has
spent the last ten years waiting for her and thinking about her, she has come to adopt her mannerisms.

As Ateba evokes her mother’s memory, she remembers the times that she used to massage her. She describes this act in terms of such tenderness and voluptuousness that it evokes a love affair:

*Betty fermaît les yeux, son visage se tendait, Ateba voulait qu'elle se décontracte, qu'elle s'abandonne, elle la massait de plus en plus vite, de plus en plus fort, épiant sur ses traits la progression du plaisir [...] Elle activait ses gestes, elle était heureuse, elle était la meilleure des filles, elle aidait sa mère, elle la soulageait, elle se soulageait, pour elle, pour elles. Betty soupirait. Sous les aiguillons de la volupté, les muscles cédaient, se ramollissaient, s'alianguissaient. (pp.103-04)*

[She would close her eyes, her face would relax, Ateba wanted her to relax, to let herself go; she’d massage her faster and faster, harder and harder, watching the progression of pleasure in the expression of her face. [...] She’d speed up her movements — she was happy, she was the best of daughters. She helped her mother, soothed her, soothed herself, for her for both of them. Betty would sigh. Under the stimulus of voluptuousness, her muscles would give way, soften, grow languid, p.68].

The assonance of “s”, produced especially by the use of the imperfect tense, the rhythm, the repetition, the alliteration, all endow this scene with an almost sacred, ritual, sexual and intimate significance, but which is immediately destroyed in an abrupt manner by Betty’s brutal words: “L’homme avec qui je suis sortie hier soir a un mauvais sang” (p.104) [“The man I went out with last night has bad blood,” p.68]. In this way Ateba deduces that this “mauvais sang correspondait à la salété et aux miasmes qu’ils déversaient dans le corps de sa mère” (p.104) [’bad blood’ was connected to the dirt and the rank streams they poured into her mother’s body, pp.68-69]. One only need note the use of the third person plural pronoun “they” to realise that Ateba is aware of the procession of men who have had sex with her mother, just like the string of “papas” presented to her by Ada. Ateba is powerless in the face of her mother’s lifestyle, and becomes a more overt victim when one of her mother’s lovers, often violent with Betty, also attacks Ateba when the child attempts to protect her mother. Ateba’s desire to protect her mother indicates a reversal of the mother/daughter role, also noted in *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*, and her failure to do so emphasises the futility of such an anomalous situation.

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Betty’s disappearance leaves a lasting legacy on her daughter, not only of psychological trauma, but also of its physical manifestations, as she is subject to fainting spells. Of these, the narrator comments: “Ce ne sont pas seulement les caprices d’une enfant abandonnée. C’est quelque chose d’autre, une angoisse qui la meurtrit, la ronge, la creuse avant de la brûler toute” (p. 38) [They are not merely the whims of an abandoned child. It’s something else, an anguish that wounds her, eats away at her, bores into her before setting her whole being on fire, p. 19]. The violence of the verbs used, emphasised in the alliterated “r” sound, all testify to Ateba’s suffering as a result of her mother’s rejection of her, but it is only the culmination of a series of rejections experienced by the women in Soleil. Ateba’s own mother is a prime example. When called a bastard by children at school, Ateba asks her mother what has become of her father. The reply: “Son amour pour un jeune flic, le bonheur, l’enfant, l’abandon, la honte, la haine” (p. 144) [Her love for a young cop, happiness, the child, desertion, shame, hatred, p. 97].

The depiction by Beyala of Ateba’s surrogate mother, her aunt Ada, serves to underline the fact that Ateba is only one of a long line of women whose destiny is that of an unfulfilled life: “J’ai réussi à lui programmer la même destinée que moi, que ma mère, qu’avant elle la mère de ma mère. La chaîne n’est pas rompue, la chaîne n’a jamais été rompue” (p. 12) [I’ve succeeded in putting together the same destiny for her as for myself, just like my mother’s and my mother’s mother before her. The chain has not been broken, the chain has never been broken, p. 1]. This matrilineal legacy might be thought to be positive, but the description which follows of Ada undercuts any possibility of this: “Elle claquait de la langue, remuait de la croupe, se mouchait bruyamment et donnait des détails piquants sur son projet” (p. 12). (She’d click her tongue, wiggle her rump, blow her nose noisily, and give titillating details about her plan, pp. 1-2). This citation would suggest a lack of harmony in Ada’s unrestrained comments and actions rather than any reciprocal amity. Indeed, as suggested by J.M. Volet: “Ada est une sorte de ‘mère sociale,’ une forme de conscience inhibitrice qu’elle a été amenée à intérioriser petit à petit.” [Ada is a sort of “social mother,” a form of inhibiting conscience that she has gradually interiorised]. But Ada is not just Ateba’s conscience, she is her jailer who metes out punishment. Ateba must constantly account for her movements and after Betty’s departure, Ada’s behaviour becomes increasingly irrational, manifested in her constant thrashing of Ateba. Additionally, she expects the girl to obey her every command. At home Ateba has only her
aunt Ada and a series of "uncles," which is how she refers to her aunt's succession of lovers. Her relationship with her aunt is totally void of emotional sustenance: "elles vivent côté à côté depuis des années sans se voir, sans se connaître, elles mourront sans s'être réellement vues" (p.30) [for years they've been living side by side without seeing each other, without knowing each other; they will die without having truly seen each other, p.13]. This description evokes an almost existential emptiness which is frequently apparent. There is a moment when Ateba desperately feels the need to confide in Ada, to receive some human warmth, but Ada is insensitive to her niece's emotional needs. There is a total lack of communication between them.

When Ada suspects that Ateba may have lost her virginity, she insists on subjecting her to the "egg ritual," where Ateba is forced to undergo a physical examination of her vagina. Ada's exploitation of her niece, for she is primarily concerned about her marriageability, is reminiscent of Tanga's mother's attitude towards her daughter when she subjects her to excision in Beyala's second novel, *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, which I shall discuss in the next chapter. And yet Ada's behaviour may also be attributed to the effect of Betty's disappearance on her. She has acted as a mother herself towards her younger sister and then feels betrayed when Betty disappears, leaving Ateba in her care as a sort of replacement. Ada's fear that Ateba will repeat her mother's actions is obviously a legacy of Betty's conduct towards her, for she had loved Betty as if were her own daughter, but she had left with a man without worrying about what would become of either Ada or Ateba.

The fact that Ateba loses her mother while only a child affects her even several years later and may, as in the case of Ken in *Le Baobab fou*, be the reason for her inability to form any kind of meaningful relationship with either sex, her attachment to Irène being somewhat of an exception: but even in this friendship, Ateba never really returns the confidences that Irène makes to her. She prefers to listen to her friend and offer her advice and support. It is clear that Irène's lifestyle reminds her of her mother: "Ce soir, Irène sortira. Une autre vie, un autre cycle, un autre cirque. Irène se perdra pour l'homme et se réincamera" (p.113/4) [Tonight Irene will go out. Another life, another cycle, another circus. Irene will throw herself away for the sake of a man and will be reincarnated, p.76]. Ateba adopts a protective and caring role
towards Irène, just as she did with her own mother, always there to listen to her troubles and to help her, as when she accompanies her to the hospital for an abortion. It is at this time that she feels an overpowering physical attraction towards her friend, and a desire to touch her, but fails to reach out to her. Whether this feeling is due to an unvoiced lesbianism or a desire to recreate the physical contact which she experienced with her mother is debateable.97

At the end of the novel Ateba succumbs to the encroaching madness which has haunted her throughout the novel. Her relationships with the opposite sex, all consisting of sexual denigration, in the acts of self-abasement she is forced to endure, seem to be replays of the relationships that she herself witnessed as a young child between her mother and her succession of partners. In Ateba’s own series of encounters with the opposite sex, in which each man attempts some kind of sexual violence, what is interesting is both Ateba’s own increasingly rebellious attitude, and the role played by the memory of her mother, as she becomes more and more willing to assert herself. In her first subjection to sexual violence, Jean Zepp, the lodger at her aunt’s house, attempts to rape her and to force her into an act of fellatio. She considers aggression: “Et si elle arrêtait le cours de l’histoire en arrachant son sexe d’un coup de dents?”(p.45) [and if she were to stop the flow of history by tearing his sex organ off with her teeth?, p.24] but she “ne fait rien, ne dit rien, elle n’a plus que ses larmes qu’elle tente de retenir et qui, comme d’habitude, forment un écran derrière lequel elle contemple son impuissance”(p.46) [does nothing, says nothing. All she has left are her tears which she tries to hold back, and that, as usual, form a screen behind which she contemplates her helplessness, p.24]. The next episode of casual sexual violence which Ateba undergoes causes her to think of her mother, Betty and the repeated physical onslaughts on her. The persistence and force of Ateba’s attacker in this episode allow him to penetrate her and at this moment she thinks of her mother, and the series of sexual relationships which she entered into consensually. This thought helps Ateba to find the strength to retaliate: “D’un geste rageur elle accroche sa main au sexe, le retire, le serre, elle serre de plus en plus fort”(p.152) [With a savagely furious motion, her hand grabs his penis, pulls it out, tightens around it, more and more tightly, p.103]. The third episode is subsequent to her friend Irène’s death from an abortion. Distraught after finding her friend dead, Ateba appears to lose all sense of rationality as she continues to search for her, frequenting the bars where Irène used to pick up clients until she actually seems to “become”
her friend when she herself acts as a prostitute and picks up someone in a bar: "Dans les prunelles de l'homme, elle cherche les pas de la femme..."(p.170) [She's searching for woman's footsteps in the pupils of man's eyes..., p.116]. After having endured the sexual act with her client, Ateba realises that Irène is not there. Attempting to leave her client's apartment, she is stopped by him as he, like Zepp before, forces her to perform an act of fellatio. The unidentified narrator then informs the reader: "Je vois la femme déployer ses ailes, cracher le sperme aux pieds de l'homme, lui balancer un lourd cendrier de cuivre sur le crâne [...] je sens l'apocalypse venir"(p.173) [I see the woman unfolding her wings, spitting the sperm at the man's feet, flinging a heavy copper ashtray at his skull [...] I feel the coming of the apocalypse, p.118]. Too many times a victim, Ateba finally becomes the aggressor. She seems to yield to the madness which has previously threatened to manifest itself, when she embraces the corpse of her victim, believing it to be that of Irène. This belief may be attributed to the fact that she has just witnessed her friend's inert body, and this vision returns to her mind when she is confronted with the corpse of the man she has just killed. Her murderous act seems to result from a desire for vengeance as a result not only of her own oppression, but also the many injustices suffered by all the women who are enumerated in the novel, especially those of her friend Irène and her mother Betty, both of whose loss she mourns.

At the end of the novel Ateba's imaginary nature predominates when she envisages a future where she will be joined together with the stars. As I have noted, woman has been associated with star imagery throughout the novel. Such a desire may symbolise the protagonist's need to become united with a community of women. During the symbolic ending of the novel Ateba banishes the spirit endowed with her double voice. The spirit, whose physical presence is described for the first time, is dressed as a bride. Such a description is reminiscent of the novel's preface which refers to Solomon's bride. In rejecting this spirit bride, perhaps Ateba is also rejecting society's role for her, that of wifehood. It may also signify a self-affirming act, that she now feels complete, she is no longer fragmented, and therefore has no need of her spirit companion. Instead she fulfils an earlier intention, that of marrying the stars. In other words she intends to dedicate her life to a female unity, as she advances towards "la clarté diffuse à l'horizon. Ce n'est pas cela qui l'attire mais cette lueur plus vive, tapie dans les eaux complexes des femmes à venir"(p.174) [the radiating brightness on the horizon. It is not that
which attracts her, but the more vivid glow hidden away inside the intricate waters of the women to come, p.120]. It seems then that, by the end of the novel, Ateba has been able to overcome the terrible sense of loss experienced at her mother’s absence in a kind of apocalyptic vision which includes a future where women will be empowered.

**Conclusion**

One of the most remarkable points to emerge when considering the anglophone and francophone novels included in this chapter is the negative portrayal of the mother/daughter relationship in all of the novels apart from Nozipo Maraire’s *Zenzele*. What may account for the more positive depiction of the mother/daughter relationship in *Zenzele*? One factor which may contribute to the less traumatic nature of this relationship is the elevated socio-economic status of the family which shields it from the effects of poverty apparent in most of the other works, although I am not suggesting that mothers who come from a low socio-economic position are less likely to love their offspring, just that there are added burdens with which they must cope. Perhaps more importantly, the epistolary form of the novel necessitates a physical distance between mother and daughter and, in this respect, their relationship is never really tested to any great extent, the scenes describing them in one another’s company being told retrospectively from the mother’s perspective. Equally, the reader never really enters into the daughter’s consciousness, so an illusion of harmony is easier to maintain. However, the distance evoked in the epistolary format may be said to be counteracted somewhat in the inherent orality in the form of folktales and motherly advice. Moreover, references to the natural world and the importance of physical touch, emphasise the special ways in which information is passed from surrogate mother to daughter, as in Shiri’s relationship with her future mother-in-law.

Although from the title of Maraire’s epistolary novel, *Zenzele*, one would assume that its narrative would focus primarily on the daughter, it is very much a life story of the mother/narrator, Shiri, and from that point of view it is unusual, not only in the canon of African literature, but also in its Western counterpart, where it is normally the “daughter’s” story which is paramount. It is also one of the few Zimbabwean novels by a woman writer that seeks to
incorporate a description of the war of independence into its domestic narrative, the work of Yvonne Vera being a notable exception. It also overturns the mother/daughter hierarchy in that it describes a situation in which a mother, as she is passing traditional lore on to her daughter, is deriving the benefit of her daughter’s more modern perspective and, as a result, changing and adapting her views to more easily achieve the sense of inner harmony that she possesses by the novel’s end.

With regard to Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* the blurring of mother/daughter identities, especially apparent in the process of naming, is a distinctive feature of this novel. Additionally, the at times conflicting information provided, adds to its complexity. In such an environment the ambivalent nature of mother love is highlighted, as are a young woman’s attempts to come to terms with the loss of her mother, as well as her endeavours at personal fulfilment. Although Phephelaphi is able to finally accept her mother’s death under the stirring influence of the music played by the men in her community, it is nevertheless noticeable that such an environment is not enabling for her in her personal quest for self-realisation. Listening to the men and their belief that “a woman is for loving” (p.68), Phephelaphi wants to retort that “it was not like that at all, it was that a woman must love herself enough” (p.68). However, perhaps because of her insecure family life, epitomised in the loss of both her biological and adoptive mothers, Phephelaphi does not possess the resources to understand the concept of self-love, “how she got to love her own knees, and kiss her own elbows, how she got to feel she was all the breeze there is and all the mornings there are and all the loving there could be... Finding herself, that was it. She did not know what this entailed” (p.69). It is this failure in her life which dooms Phephelaphi to her fate and which provides her with the solace of an unnatural form of self-love, as instanced in her self-immolation. As the flames whip around her body she feels “A touch, her own genuine touch; to love her own body now, after he has loved and left it, to love her own eyebrows and her own knees, finally she has done so, embracing each part of herself with flame, deeply and specially” (pp.129-30).

Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* also ends with the death of its principal protagonist who appears to be destroyed not only by her own weak constitution when faced with an arduous childbirth, but by feelings of contrition at not conforming with her society’s strictures. A
reading of Emecheta’s autobiographical work *Head Above Water* helps explain the author’s attitude towards her protagonist Aku-nna. In this work she states that although Aku-nna has the courage to assert herself in the choice of a husband, her immaturity allows her to be destroyed by guilt. Emecheta contrasts Aku-nna’s guilt with the remorse she herself feels in her relationship with her own mother. She states that the rift which her marriage with Sylvester Onwordi had caused between them, especially as the marriage was not successful, had been made worse by a community which insisted that her mother had “died not blessing [her]” (p.3). However, upon reflection she realises that she was “stronger both emotionally and spiritually” (p.4) than the protagonist of *The Bride Price* who was unable to resist a communal condemnatory attitude. Although in both works the oppressive nature of such an influence is exposed, there is at the same time a more optimistic representation of community values, reflective of a communal approach to mothering.

With respect to the francophone works studied, Ken Bugul’s two autobiographical novels accentuate above all the narrator’s constant lament for her missing mother. Both *Le Baobab fou* and *Cendres et braises* depict a narrator who seeks, unsuccessfully, to re-establish the close relationship with her mother that she remembers experiencing as a young child and her resulting sense of alienation. Her lack of success in this endeavour is reflected by the narrator’s tendency to depict the mother in terms of a symbol, rather than a living, breathing human being. In this regard Bugul appears to conform in some respects to the Negritude school of writing, but in other ways she seeks to subvert it. Although she describes her mother in terms of stereotypes of Mother Africa, eternal, long-suffering and in harmony with her environment, she nevertheless is quite provocative in the way that she questions her mother as “all-loving.” The mother she depicts, as we have seen, is prepared to abandon her young daughter, whatever may have been her reason for doing so. D’Almeida’s comment with regard to Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou* is pertinent here: “In uncovering the emotional break between her mother and herself, Ken Bugul explodes the African image of the mother in symbiosis with the family, and particularly with her daughters.” Moreover, d’Almeida appears to derive a purely sociological interpretation from a literary analysis of a novel, which even if based on autobiography, is still nevertheless a work of fiction.
In the final novel to be included in this chapter, Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée*, we are once again privy to a daughter’s constant yearning for the return of her absent mother. Ateba too has no suitable mother substitute, for her aunt Ada is unable to provide her with the emotional sustenance she is seeking. However, the protagonist does achieve some sense of fulfilment in her imagined world of woman-centred destinies. The mother/daughter relationship here is based not only on loss, but on an identity centred on sexual relationships, the mother’s and subsequently the daughter’s. Unlike her mother, however, Ateba is described as a woman who refuses to be an object of male sexual fantasy and whose sexuality is in tune with her own body, in the scenes describing her autoeroticism, and with other women, in the physical yearnings and pleasure she derives from her relationships with Irène and with her mother. In this way Beyala not only subverts a tradition in male African writing which fails to deal with a woman’s sexuality, at least from a woman’s perspective, but also raises the possibility of a woman-centred sexuality or lesbianism. Additionally, Beyala has made use of a whole series of cosmic images and, especially in connection with her chosen title, this imagery is interspersed with biblical allusion and a reference to Aimé Césaire, the chief Caribbean proponent of Negritude. Indeed, there is also an allusion in *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* to Africa as a metaphor for woman, cited by a male character who is described as somewhat of an Africanist but who seems to be given little credence by the narrator. He remarks to Ateba that: “L’Afrique n’est ni un fait ni un geste, mais une réalité qui prend source dans nos coeurs, exactement comme la femme” (p.148) [Africa is neither a fact nor a gesture, but a reality that springs from our hearts, in precisely the same way as woman does, p.101]. Ateba, responding to these affected words, replies ironically that: “Si la femme est comme l’Afrique, ni fait, ni geste, l’homme est l’acte qui s’annule au premier contact et s’évapore au premier mot” (p.150). [“If woman is like Africa, neither fact nor gesture, then man is the act which cancels itself at the first touch and evaporates with the first word.”] (p.102). Thus Beyala, through her protagonist, is categorical in her rejection of such stereotypical sexist views, although ironically the author does tend to stereotype and essentialise her protagonists.

All of the novels studied, both anglophone and francophone, apart from Zenzele, depict a mother/daughter relationship based on rejection. In the case of Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*, a child
is rejected at birth, and is raised in difficult circumstances by an adoptive mother. In Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*, the mother’s rejection is not quite so overt but nevertheless her attitude hastens her daughter’s untimely fate. Equally, in *Head Above Water* the narrator admits the ambivalent nature of the relationship with her mother. In the case of Bugul’s two autobiographical novels, the narrator has been unable to come to terms with the trauma she suffered at the loss of her mother at a young age. In Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*, despite the fact that Ateba is never able to fully reconcile herself to her mother’s desertion of her, she does achieve some form of solace in an imaginary universe, but it is at the cost of living in a separatist world where man is the enemy. In the novels studied, fostering of the daughter is broached as a solution to the absent mother when the daughter is at an age to still require care, although even in the case of *Zenzele*, when the daughter is already independent, the narrative hints that Shiri has prepared for her sister to perpetuate the mothering process after her death. Adoption takes place both in Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* and Emecheta’s autobiography. In *The Bride Price*, although Aku-nna’s mother is still alive, she is neglectful and other members of the community look out for Aku-nna’s welfare, as does Chike, her future husband. In Bugul’s autobiographical works the mother is again alive, but Ken is frequently lodged with other family members during her schooling in Senegal, and in Europe she is constantly in search of alternative mother figures. The mother in Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* is absent and although Ateba is adopted by her aunt, like Ken, she feels like an orphan. Most, but not all, of the foster mothers are relatives, as reflected in sociological data.102

Where the mothers do reject their daughters, their actions take place against a background of corruption and abjection, which affect the mother/daughter relationship adversely. This is especially apparent in Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* where there is an implicit criticism by the narrator of a corrupt political system which allows overwhelming poverty, but such condemnation is subsumed in the personal narrative of her heroine. Nevertheless the narrator manages to convey her belief that characters such as Ateba, Ada and Betty are products of their environment:

*Au fur et à mesure, le boulevard se rétrécit, devient sale, puis crasseux. Là-bas, loin, caché derrière une colline d’ordures, le QG […] C’est là qu’Ateba est née. C’est là que Betty l’a laissée. C’est là-bas que, les jambes lasses, la tête pleine d’autres vies, elle s’englue dans la misère.*103 (pp.73-74)
Slowly but surely, the boulevard grows narrow, becomes dirty, then downright filthy. Down there, far away, hidden behind a hill of garbage, the QG [...] That is where Ateba was born. That is where Betty abandoned her. Down there is where she is bogged down in poverty, with weary legs, and her head filled with other lives, p.46].

Equally, the narrators of Zenzele and Butterfly Burning make explicit their disapproval of the colonial politics governing pre-independent Zimbabwe and reflect the disempowerment of this country's indigenous population in both novels. In Bugul’s two works there exists a criticism of French neo-colonialist attitudes as evinced in Ken’s comment: “L’indépendance était comme la reconnaissance et l’officialisation de la dépendance”(Le Baobab fou, p.144) [Independence was rather a recognizing of dependence and making it official, p.125]. In her desire to criticise the attitude of the French, Ken romanticises and idealises life in Africa from the distant perspective of two European countries, Belgium and France. However, this romanticisation is followed by disillusion because the narrator never appears to find the solace or the close relationship she is seeking with her mother, although there is a suggestion that she does achieve some sense of inner harmony in her relationship with the Marabout. Emecheta might be said to be an exception to the other writers as her narrator levels a critique at traditional society and its practices such as the bride price, leviticus or wife inheritance and ethnic discrimination, all of which have a negative influence on the mother/daughter relationship in The Bride Price. However, it must be noted that traditional practices also come under scrutiny in Zenzele.

A striking feature of all of these novels is a rejection on the part of the younger generation of their procreative role. Indeed, in Vera’s Butterfly Burning and Bugul’s Le Baobab fou steps are taken to ensure that such an eventuality does not occur by the two protagonists’ undergoing an abortion and in Beyala’s C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée, it is Ateba’s friend, Irène, who undergoes this – in her case – fatal procedure. Perhaps such a decision is indicative of these protagonists’ desire to avoid repeating the mistakes of their own mother/child relationship. Certainly the rejection of the mothering role appears to be personally motivated, as a result of a severe restriction on women’s choice. In Vera’s Butterfly Burning this is presented as the only possible solution in a world where being black, female and poor in a colonised country severely
limits one's options. In the case of the narrator of *Le Baobab fou* it is presented as a confused act by a protagonist faced with the possibility of giving birth to a child of mixed race into what she perceives to be a racist world. In both cases it may also be as a result of a subconscious desire to reject their potential offspring, as they too have been rejected by their own mothers. In the case of Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* Irène’s abortion is the result of her poverty and of her profession as a prostitute, although she yearns for domesticity and a husband and children. It also suggests an implicit criticism of a neo-colonialist society which only seems capable of transmitting misery. As Ateba relates, concerning her friend’s abortion, “Après tout qu’importe la vie d’un gosse dans ce pays où tout est constamment à l’état embryonnaire?” (p.131) [After all, what does one kid’s life matter in this country where everything is constantly in an embryonic state? p.89]. The only positive mother/daughter relationship alluded to, in Maraire’s *Zenzele*, is really a life story of Shiri, the mother, rather than *Zenzele*, the daughter, although the importance of both preceding and succeeding generations is stressed, a factor also present in Emecheta’s *The Bride Price*, but lacking in all the other novels. The lack of a sound mother/daughter relationship in the other novels may be due to the lack of a suitable role model for the daughter who is growing into womanhood, due to the mother’s physical absence, an unsuitable surrogate or if present, the mother’s lack of power in a patriarchal society. Such a phenomenon is explored in the following chapter on the subject of excision, which is implicated in the mother/daughter relationship.

Notes

1 Renée Larrier makes this point in her article “Reconstructing Motherhood,” p.197.
4 See section entitled “The Leitmotif of the Absent Mother,” pp.107-11 of this chapter for a fuller discussion of Emecheta’s relationship with her mother.
6 According to one article “girls are slightly more likely to be fostered away than boys [...] While girls and boys experience similar rates of parental absence below 10, the rates for girls are notably higher in the 10-14 age group, possibly because of the greater tendency to foster out girls as domestic servants and child-minders,” Ann K. Blanc and C.B. Lloyd, “Women’s Work, Child-Bearing and Child-Rearing over the Life Cycle in Ghana,” in

7 Ibid., p.113.


10 Patrick Corcoran has noted the “surprising frequency” with which father/son relationships are foregrounded in African fiction but all his examples are by male writers. See “Fathers and Sons in African Fiction,” J.P. Little and Roger Little, eds., *Black Accents: Writing in French from Africa, Mauritius and the Caribbean, Proceedings of the ASCALF Conference held in Dublin, 8-10 April 1995* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1997), pp.83-96.


13 This focus on the mother/daughter relationship is often associated in African-American and African-Caribbean fiction with the absence of the father, the product of social patterns which some commentators see as rooted in the disruptive effect of slavery on family structure.


15 In an interview with Eva Hunter which took place before the publication of *Butterfly Burning*, referring to her novel *Nehanda* (Harare: Baobab Books, 1993), Vera commented on how the books on colonialism that she had read “hardly even mentioned women’s voices.” To look then at her own country’s history and to “know that absolutely the first person to lead any kind of resistance, any kind of resistance against the Europeans, was a woman. That really was an engaging, mesmerising, history.” “Shaping the Truth of the Struggle,” p.78. (Emphasis in original).

16 Hirsch, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*. By “maternal repression” Hirsch is referring to the way in which maternal perspectives and experiences are excluded from writing by the writers she discusses in order to conform to what she calls “conventions of realism.” p.14.

17 Ibid.

18 An interesting slant on women colluding with patriarchy is the attitude of earlier male writers such as Chinua Achebe with regard to the older generations’ collusion with colonialism. Gareth Griffiths raises this issue in an article about the “missing volume” of the trilogy referred to by Chinua Achebe concerning the “lost generation of Nwoye/Isaac.” Widening the debate from a personal perspective to post-colonial literary poetics generally, Griffiths points to the difficulties inherent in the task of formulating the “revolutionary public consequences of the personal ‘betrayals’ of those transitional figures who straddle the period of cultural onslaught and change.” See “Chinua Achebe: When Did You Last See Your Father” in *World Literature Written in English* 27.1 (1987):18-27, pp.18, 26. See also chapter 4 in relation to Dangarembga’s novel *Nervous Conditions* which presents protagonists prepared to collude with colonialism as a means of self-preservation.


21 Ibid., p. 30.

22 Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, eds., *Interviews with Writers of the Post-colonial World* p. 93. Emecheta further comments that it is only Black American women writers who write with an “African consciousness... And that is my tradition. Women are carriers of culture in whatever language,” p. 99.

23 Angele Rawiri, *G’amerakano, au carrefour* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1989). One must acknowledge, however, that in *Une si longue lettre* Ramatoulaye’s daughters, despite their modern, Westernised attitudes, show her considerable support and solidarity.

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30 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p.121. She goes on to say that “In Africa it is said that every griotte [woman story-teller] who dies is a whole library that burns down,” p. 121. This latter quotation from Minh-ha’s work is virtually identical to a reference of Jacques Chevrier’s: “Dans l’Afrique d’aujourd’hui, prophétise l’érudit malien Hampate Bâ, chaque vieillard qui meurt, c’est une bibliothèque qui brûle” [In today’s Africa, forecasts the scholarly Hampate Bâ, each elderly person who dies is a library burnt down]. See the “Avant-propos” to *Littérature Nègre: Afrique, Antilles, Madagascar*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 1974, Seconde Edition), pp.5-8, p.6. One can only assume that Minh-ha had read the original citation by Hampate Bâ or Chevrier’s reference to it, and adapted it to refer to a female story-teller, more in keeping with her feminist sympathies. Little information on the role of the griotte seems to be available. According to Miller “the role and work of griot women have not been documented in any systematic way, and male griots are the only ones who have entered into collaborative relationships with historians and anthropologists,” p.264. He cites Mamadou Diawara’s work as an exception to this, “Women, Servitude, and History: The Oral Historical Traditions of Women of Servile Condition in the Kingdom of Jaara [Mali] from the Fifteenth to the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” in Karin Barber and Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, eds., *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham University African Studies Series, No. 1, 1989), pp.109-37.

31 In African oral societies men and women had distinctive and different narrative modes of expression – a feature too of other oral societies, e.g. the Australian Aboriginal language groups where there is both male and female “knowledge,” “legends,” etc. which rather undercuts Trinh’s feminist stance.


33 Emphasis in original.

34 See the section on Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* in this chapter, particularly pp.139-41.


36 Some of the recent titles of critical works on African women’s writing signify the importance of speaking out, notably d’Almeida’s *Francophone African Women: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence* and Madeleine Borgomanò’s *Voix et visages de femmes* [Women’s Voices and Faces] (Paris: CEDA, 1989).


39 Ibid.

The manner in which womanhood is associated with nature is representative of one particular strand of feminist thought espoused by writers such as Mary Daly in her criticism *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: The Women’s Press, 1979). This type of feminist theorising, however, which is a type of eco-feminism, has been criticised by other feminists as essentialist. See also Sherry B. Ortner’s “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp.67-87. Ortner’s article enquires into why woman is seen as closer to nature and argues that “the view of her as closer to nature is in turn embodied in institutional forms that reproduce her situation,” and is thus a circular argument, p.87.

40 Ibid.

41 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 121.

42 Boyce Davies, in a survey of writing by anglophone African male writers, comments that in their work their women characters usually “function either as symbols or as instruments for the male hero’s working out of his problems.” “Introduction” to *Ngambika*, p.3. See also the chapter entitled “The Mother Africa Trope” in Stratton’s *Contemporary African Literature*, pp.39-55. On African francophone writing by men see the work of Arlette Chemain-Degrange, *Emancipation féminine et roman africain* (Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1980), p. 23. (See also endnote no. 68 of this chapter).

43 One organisation which is attempting to combat illiteracy is “Zimbabwe Women Writers” whose director is Ruth Gabi. It was founded in 1990 and it not only promotes women’s writing in Zimbabwe but also literacy among women. It has published an anthology of women’s writing in English, Norma Kitson, ed., *Zimbabwe Women Writers Anthology* (Harare: Zimbabwe Women Writers, 1994) and intends to publish two more in Ndebele and Shona. Personal communication by Ruth Gabi, November 1996.


46 Ibid., p.120. It seems reasonable to assume that Maraire may have been influenced by her South African neighbour in at least the structuring device of her novel.

47 These two moments of “history” are, of course, formally linked in the discourse of Zimbabwean black resistance in the common use of the term, 1st and 2nd Chimurenga to describe both wars – the late 19th century resistance war, and the second war against the Smith, post-UDI regime.

48 Cynthia Ward, “What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of “Otherhood,” *PMLA* 105.1 (1990): 83-97, p.90. Ward also points out that in many ways the story of Nwakwaluzo Ogboeyin echoes that of Emecheta’s in many ways. “Both girls earned respect from their families because they successfully ushered male children into the world” and both “successfully overcame their predetermined social roles and appropriated the roles of men to build their own status”, Ogboeyin to become a hunter and Emecheta to become a writer. (Ibid.). Ezenwato-Ohaeto also comments on the influence the events surrounding her birth had on Emecheta’s “determination to survive,” “Tropes of Survival: Protest and Affirmation in Buchi Emecheta’s Autobiography, *Head Above Water*” in Marie Umeh, ed., *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, pp.349-66, p.350.

49 Ward sees Ogboeyin’s privileging oral over material values as “confound[ing] any interpretation of the story as representative of African women’s cultural insignificance” in “What They Told Buchi Emecheta,” p.90. Such treatment underlines Emecheta’s importance to her community because her identity was tied in to the matrix of familial, ancestral, clan, and village relationships,” Ibid., p.91.

50 “All I ever wanted was to tell my stories from my own home, just like my big mother Nwakwaluzo used to tell her stories in her very own compound with her back leaning against the ukwa tree,” *Head Above Water*, p. 242;

“I liked the power these women [from her village] commanded as story-tellers. Since then, I thought I would like to be a story-teller myself;” James, *In Their Own Voices*, p.37.


52 Ibid., p.153, where Mbaye describes the origins of her pseudonym.

53 Ibid.


58 This is also a feature of Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat (1967; London: Heinemann, 1986) the train representing the outside world impinging on the Gikuyu.


60 Other critics, for example Lucien Houedanou, “Islam et société dans la littérature féminine du Sénégal,” in Nouvelles du Sud 7 (1987): 159-70, p.166 and Mortimer, Journeys Through the French African Novel, p.174, have made this point, the latter believing that Ken’s process of defining herself is in respect to race as well as to gender.

61 Mortimer also comments on this aspect of the novel: “Unable to verbalize the anger toward the mother who had left her unprotected, Ken later expresses the psychological pain of isolation and alienation through interior monologue. Her words remain within her until the process of writing sets them free,” Journeys Through the French African Novel, p.169.

62 For example in both Buchi Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood and Flora Nwapa’s One is Enough, prostitution is shown to be a more positive experience for a woman than being in an unhappy marriage.

63 Jean-Marie Volet, La Parole aux Africaines, p.252.

64 Magnier, “Ken Bugul ou L’écriture thérapeutique,” p.155. She even refers in this interview to what will form the subject of her third work, her married life with a marabout, and Cendres et braises in fact concludes with the announcement of this marriage.

65 As noted by Lisa McNee in “Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women’s Autobiographical Discourses,” (Dissertation Indiana University, 1966), “Marie” is a French version of “Mariétou.” McNee maintains that “Forced to create two personae – a social persona named ‘Mariétou Mbaye’ and a literary person named ‘Ken Bugul,’ the author of Cendres et braises then fuses the two in a work that resists standard definitions of either the novel or the autobiography,” p.323.

66 Ibid., p.151.

67 See especially Florence Stratton’s chapter on this novel, entitled “How Could Things Fall Apart For Whom They Were Not Together?” Contemporary African Literature, pp.22-38. It may be worth mentioning here, however, that there is a difference between women’s conduct in the presence of men and their conduct in the presence of other women, a distinction not made by Stratton.

68 For example, see Chemain-Degrange, Emancipation féminine et roman africain, whose study focuses on the image of black women in works by male francophone writers both pre-Independence and post-Independence. According to Chemain-Degrange, in both these eras the black woman is presented either as a means of praising traditional black African culture or of evoking anti-colonial sentiment. She further elaborates: “Utilisée dans un témoignage sur la réalité africaine, ou considérée comme reflet de l’agressivité ou de l’euphorie masculine, la femme noire n’est jamais décrite pour elle-même,” p.23 [Used as evidence of African reality, or considered as the reflection of masculine aggressiveness or well-being, the black woman is never described on her own account].


71 D’ Almeida also cites this quotation and comments on the paradox of Bugul’s setting “apart what she wants to be close” by the use of the “generic symbol of mother as biological function.” As d’Almeida recognises “the quest for the mother is a primary motif” in Le Baobab fou, Francophone African Women Writers, p.47.


73 Christopher Miller, Theories of Africans, p.259.

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Miller does concede that Senghor, "in his capacity as President of Senegal [...] was largely responsible for the reforms in family laws enacted in 1972" which "began the process of granting equal status to women", footnote 32, p.260.

Miller's remark is also applicable to many European poets who have written in this manner, from the courtly love tradition up to and beyond Classicism. Other critics have made this point – Roger Little has referred to "Femme noire" as "the 'black' equivalent to a Renaissance blason," in "Being Fair," Peter Hawkins and Annette Lavers, eds., *Protée Noir: Essais sur la littérature francophone de l'Afrique noire et des Antilles* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1992), pp.28-36, p.31.


As Julio Finn has commented: "In slandering the virtues of the black female, Europe-American society had dealt her people a blow they could neither forgive nor forget, and the Négritude poets were determined to resurrect the pride of their race." See the chapter entitled: "The Black Woman as Symbol of the Négritude Aesthetic" in *Voices of Négritude*, pp.172-84, p.172.

Henceforth known as *Soleil* except in the conclusion to this chapter, and the overall conclusion.

Blair reads Beyala's usage of this citation as indicative of the way in which "the blame for her condition and self-neglect has been heaped on the brothers who have enslaved her." "From King Solomon to Camus: Some New Directions in African Women's Writing" in Hawkins and Lavers, eds., *Protée Noire*, pp.159-66, pp.160, 161.

Citing the refrain of Birago Diop's poem "Souffles," Les morts ne sont pas morts," in Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, pp.144-45, Brière supports this reading by referring to Abeba's "visions"

94 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, p.16.


96 J.M. Volet, La Parole aux Africaines, p.281.

97 According to Brière: “La relation entre Ateba et Irène fait partie d’une stratégie qui vise à redéfinir l’image littéraire de la femme telle qu’elle existe dans le roman masculin camerounais […] l’amour physique que ressent Ateba pour Irène crée un discours qui n’aurait jamais pu émaner d’une voix narrative masculine.” [The relationship between Ateba and Irène is part of a strategy which aims to redefine the literary image of the female as it exists in the male Cameroonian novel […] the physical love that Ateba feels for Irène creates a discourse which could never have emanated from a masculine narrative voice], Le Roman camerounais, p.239.

98 See for example Susan Rubin Suleiman’s “Writing and Motherhood,” in Shirley Nelson Garner et al., eds., The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist Psychoanalytic Interpretation (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp.352-77. In this essay Suleiman contends “Mothers don’t write, they are written. Simply expressed (to quote Helene Deutsch), this is the underlying assumption of most psychoanalytic theories about writing and about artistic creation in general,” p.356. Emphasis in original.


101 Sidonie Smith encapsulates this view in her statement: “Because the autobiographer can never fully capture the fullness of her subjectivity or understand the entire range of her experience, the narrative “I” becomes a fictive persona,” A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 46.

102 According to D.K. Fiawoo, there are three main types of fostering in traditional practice: kinship fostering, which is by far the predominant in all African societies; non-kin fostering; and crisis fostering, “Some Patterns of Foster Care in Ghana,” in C. Oppong and G. Adaba M. Bekombo-Priso J. Moge, eds., Marriage, Fertility and Parenthood in West Africa (Canberra: The Australian National University, 1978), pp.273-88, p.276.


104 Other of Emecheta’s novels, set in post-colonial Nigeria, such as The Joys of Motherhood (1979) include a criticism of both indigenous and colonial practices.
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Introduction

Until very recently, the subject of excision has formed only a small part of the work of African women writers. Sonia Lee, in her anthology Romancières du Continent noir, is the first critic to acknowledge the scarcity of writing on this subject. Paradoxically, she states, it was left to men to protest against this ancient practice, citing Ahmadou Kourouma’s novel Les Soleils des indépendances (1968). Lee conjectures that the reason for this silence may well be the painful nature of the subject. This is reminiscent of Toni Morrison’s contention that some subjects are “unspeakable”, as her protagonist Sethe maintains in relation to the issue of slavery in the novel Beloved (1988). More recently, Lilian Kesteloot in an article entitled “Littérature africaine: thèmes oubliés...sujets tabous” has commented on the lack of representation of excision as a subject of both male and female African writers. Kesteloot is not afraid to address this silence, referring to one author in particular, Soyinka, whom she describes as “le grand défenseur de la démocratie et de l’égalité” [the great defender of democracy and equality], but who has remained silent on the subject of the excision of young Yoruba girls. She believes that the silence of African writers on the subject may reflect the authors’ social condition, as those who form part of an educated bourgeoisie may wish to keep their distance from what they perceive to be “des coutumes archaïques” [archaic customs]. Such reasoning may also reflect what the authors consider to be a question of bienséance, what is and what is not appropriate material both for themselves and for their readers.
Before developing this topic further, an explication regarding my choice of terminology is necessary. The term female genital mutilation “is the collective name given to several different traditional practices that involve the cutting of female genitals.” Not only is this a rather cumbersome formula for the purposes of a study, but the word “mutilation” itself carries a heavy emotive charge. There is also a case for avoiding the expression “circumcision” since this procedure alludes to only a very small minority of cases where the prepuce and/or tip of the clitoris is removed. Clitoridectomy or excision involves the removal of part of the clitoris or its entirety, and often the entire clitoris and parts of the labia minora. Infibulation or pharaonic circumcision consists of the removal of the entire clitoris, labia minora and much of the labia majora. The edges of the labia majora are then sewn together, leaving a small opening for the passage of blood and urine. I will use these latter terms only in connection with the autobiographies by Somali women, Desert Flower and Aman. My personal choice of the term “excision” includes the general meaning of “removing by cutting”, as well as embracing the more specific denotations described above. However, bearing in mind that the authors themselves often choose one term in preference to another, usually that of circumcision, my own usage may vary at times.

Excision has well documented and detrimental physical, psychological and sexual effects, which are most severe in relation to infibulation. Immediate physical complications can include haemorrhage, severe shock, acute infection, septicemia, tetanus, damage to nearby organs and death. Long term effects may include difficult childbirth, infertility and high infant mortality. The sexual consequences are obvious: a woman’s primary sexual organ is removed, reducing her ability to reach orgasm. If she is not cut open, it takes a man an average of two to three months to penetrate his infibulated bride, a painful process for both parties. Psychologically, a woman may suffer from the trauma of the operation itself or worry about its physical or sexual consequences. Due to social pressures and lack of resources, there is often no treatment available.

Across the world two million girls are at risk of excision, approximately 6,000 per day. The age at which the procedure is carried out varies between a few weeks to sixteen years old, although the most common age is between four and eight.
Excision has been reported in at least twenty-six African countries, primarily Sub-Saharan African and Egypt in Northern Africa, in a few groups in Asia and among some African immigrants in Europe, Canada, the USA and Australia.\textsuperscript{18} It is estimated that some 130 million women and girls alive today have been excised.\textsuperscript{19} No one knows exactly when or how the practice began, although scholars speculate that it originated along the Nile Valley. The earliest references indicate that the ancient Egyptians, Jews, Phoenicians and Hittites performed the surgery.\textsuperscript{20} It was also employed by modern physicians in England and the United States as recently as the 1940s and 50s to treat hysteria, lesbianism, masturbation and other so-called female deviances.\textsuperscript{21} Sexual, patriarchal, religious, traditional and cultural reasons have been given to explain the practice, although explanations differ between regions and tribes. One common misconception is that it is an Islamic practice, but in fact it is a cultural, not a religious custom. This belief stems from the fact that some African Muslim communities cite religion as the reason for performing it and many Westerners have associated excision with Islam.\textsuperscript{22}

It is only very recently that excision has formed the main thematic focus of a novel by a sub-Saharan African woman writer, Fatou Keïta, in her first published novel, \textit{Rebelle} (1998). Additionally, the topic is dealt with extensively in a newly published autobiography, Waris Dirie’s \textit{Desert Flower} (1994). In earlier works by women excision was treated in a more circumspect manner. Such is the case in what is regarded as the first novel written by an African woman writer in English, Flora Nwapa’s \textit{Efuru} (1966).\textsuperscript{23} Another relatively unknown anglophone novel and one that has received little critical attention is the Kenyan writer Muthoni Likimani’s novel \textit{They Shall Be Chastized}, published in 1974. Again, excision is not the major focus of this writer, who is mainly concerned with the effects of colonial influences, notably that of the Missionary church, on life in Kenya during colonialism. However, the issue of excision is presented as crucial to the relationship between the British missionaries and the local people and as a principal cause of the split in the local populace itself. Also interesting, is the male Kenyan writer Ngugi’s novel \textit{The River Between} (1988), which is likewise set in Kenya and deals with the clash of cultures between the Gikuyu and the Missionaries, but in addition, explores the internal rivalries of the Gikuyu people and one woman’s determination to undergo excision in
order to prove herself worthy of her tribe. Both these novels are aptly counterbalanced by a recently published article by Lynn Thomas which deals with the whole history of the British attempts to wipe out the practice in Kenya, whose time frame coincides with that of the two Kenyan novels.24

The following two anglophone novels to be explored in this chapter are two Somali autobiographical works: Aman (1994) by Aman and Desert Flower (1998) by Waris Dirie. Both works are written with the collaboration of Western writers and Janice Boddy who writes the foreword to Aman refers to it as an “oral history.”25 Such a collaborative writing process raises several important issues concerning issues of power and narrative control.26 The former, tracing the life-story of a young Somali girl, Aman, includes an account of her excision and infibulation which is set against a background of rapid social change in Somalia during the 1950s and ‘60s, and ends with her flight to Tanzania at the age of seventeen due to the military take-over in her country. Desert Flower recounts the story of a young Somali woman who recalls her life as a nomad in the Somali desert and who subsequently becomes a top model, wife and mother and finally a “goodwill ambassador” to the United Nations. In this role she campaigns to eradicate excision, which she fervently opposes, having experienced excision and infibulation at the age of five. In fact, the paratext quickly alerts the reader to the political nature of this work. At the end of the autobiography is a request asking readers to support the campaign to eliminate “female genital mutilation” where funds will be used to promote programmes of information, education and social action in twenty-three countries.

In francophone literature, Calixthe Beyala considers the practice of excision in her second novel, Tu t’appelleras Tanga (1988). While this practice is not the author’s major focus, it is presented as an indictment of the way in which young women are exploited by their parents and is part of what she feels to be the general oppression of African women. Also illuminating for this study is Beyala’s non-fictional book Lettre d’une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales, in which she pleads for help from her Western sisters, an unusual approach since some African writers and commentators tend to be suspicious of Western feminists who they believe either sensationalise excision or depict African women as victims in need of their help.27 Beyala, however,
stresses those emotions she believes all women have in common, particularly the fear of violence. Finally, the only novel to date by a woman writer to have as its main thematic focus the subject of excision is, as mentioned, Fatou Keïta’s *Rebelle* (1995). It is this writer’s first novel and, as the title implies, it presents the viewpoint of a protagonist who rebels against the practices of her society, more especially excision. As such, it contrasts with Ngugi’s novel where the protagonist’s rebellion consists in undergoing this procedure. Also of considerable sociological interest is the way the novel focuses on the issue of excision for Africans living in France.

Before exploring these works in detail a brief comment is necessary for my inclusion of this subject in view of its controversial nature. I have already noted that in Beyala’s novel *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* the ambivalent treatment of excision is encapsulated in the mother’s involvement, which becomes a major source of bitterness. It is pertinent, then, to take account of the mother/daughter relationship when considering the question of excision. Moreover, many commentators or writers on this subject suggest that it is a “woman’s affair,” over which men have little control; while other commentators sometimes indicate that it is a means whereby men control African women’s sexuality. It will be interesting to determine whether the works referred to can shed any light on this complex and delicate subject. As my area of research is African women writers, the reference to male writers who have dealt with this subject will be of a brief nature and primarily aimed at elucidating those points raised by the women writers studied.

**Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*: Finding the Words**

Firstly to the most early representation of excision in a novel written by either a female or male writer, Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*. It recounts the story of a young woman called Efuru and the reference to excision forms only a small aspect of the novel as a whole. Efuru is shown to be a woman of independent spirit in several aspects. Against her father’s wishes she has married a young man who is unable to pay for her bride price. In addition to disobeying her father, an influential man in the area, she is shown to be the harder working partner in the marriage and it is through her efforts
that the bride price is eventually paid to her father. When her husband leaves her for another woman she refuses to remain the subservient wife, waiting for a faithless husband, and, when she does remarry, she again refuses to remain married to someone who mistreats her. Eventually she becomes a devotee of the Goddess Umahiri. The *dibia*, who interprets her dreams for her, comments that such chosen women are endowed with wealth, pointing to the fact that the “storey” buildings in the town were built with money provided by them (p.192). Such women also achieve great status in their respective societies. The worship of Umahiri is also a sign of Efuru’s independent spirit, as her followers are often childless, and as such go against social pressures.

Efuru’s excision takes place when she is first married and it is instigated by her mother-in-law, presumably because her own mother is deceased. Despite Efuru’s independent spirit, she does not question this practice as she does other facets of her mother-in-law’s advice. Having ascertained that Efuru is not pregnant, which would be dangerous to her health if she were to lose too much blood, the midwife goes ahead with the procedure:

You are the young wife, my daughter. You are beautiful my daughter. I will be gentle with you. Don’t be afraid. It is painful no doubt, but the pain disappears like hunger. You know what?” and she turned to Efuru’s mother-in-law. “You know Nwakaego’s daughter?” “Yes, I know her.”

“She did not have her bath before she had that baby who died after that dreadful flood.”

“God forbid. Why?”

“Fear. She was afraid. Foolish girl. She had a foolish mother, their folly cost them a son.”

“How did you know?”

“They came to me early one morning and told me. They wanted it to be done in my house so that people will not know. The dibia had already told them that the baby died because she did not have her bath. I did it for them. She remained in my house for seven days. Is everything ready now?”

“Yes, come this way.”

The woman went to the back of the house and there it was done. Efuru screamed and screamed. It was so painful. Her mother-in-law consoled her. “It will soon be over, my daughter don’t cry”(p.10).

The above quotation illustrates several points concerning attitudes towards excision, notably in the language used to describe it. What appears to be euphemistic language is apparent in the term “bath” used by the circumciser although according to Gay Wilenz, it is an Igbo term for “female circumcision.” Such terminology may be

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indicative of some form of baptism into a new life, water a symbol of rebirth and purification, which would link it more firmly with the practice of male circumcision. Moreover, its rather pleasant connotations certainly mask the painful nature of the procedure. That such a procedure is considered painful is indicated by the midwife’s reassurance to Efuru that the pain will soon disappear, likening it to hunger. This correlation is furthered when Efuru is given appetising morsels to eat and expected to rest and eat for several months following the operation. Efuru does not voice her fear or her resistance to this painful ordeal; she is silenced by the older woman’s warning of the possibility of disaster if she disobeys. She is told how an uncircumcised woman gives birth to a child who subsequently dies, the midwife stressing her foolishness and her fear, possibly of the pain involved in the procedure. It is subsequently carried out, but in secrecy, perhaps to avoid acknowledging any opposition to it. The midwife obviously believes that the baby’s death is caused by divine retribution, a point made many times in the novel with regard to other catastrophic events, but she also has a vested interest in this matter.31

Nwapa seems to make use of the practice of excision in *Efuru* in order to highlight the exceptional qualities of her heroine who, in fact, cuts short the normal period of resting and feasting to return to her work as a trader.32 Efuru obviously suffers deeply from the painful procedure to the point that her husband is also affected as he waits outside helplessly, listening to his wife’s anguish. However, it is noteworthy that his powerlessness in the face of custom is also reflected by the women themselves, as instanced by Ajanupu, the sister of Efuru’s mother-in-law, who attempts to comfort Efuru by reminding her that “It is what every woman undergoes. So don’t worry”(p.12). Her words of advice also reinforce the inevitability of a woman’s “lot.” As Tobe Levin in one of the few articles dealing with representations of excision in African literature remarks, “one disturbing aspect of the narrative lies in the defeatism of the […] exchange.”33

On the surface, Nwapa appears to present the practice of excision as simply one of the many rites that form part of communal village life. She provides small details surrounding this practice, such as the measures taken to prevent infection when visitors arrive. However, it is by means of this communal life, through the women’s
apparent innocuous chatter at the local market, that allusion is made to another circumciser, whom it was advisable to avoid as she had “not actually learnt the operation” (p.13). Nwapa uses the same device in the conversation alluded to earlier between Efuru’s mother-in-law and the dibia, when the latter mentions the dangers inherent in performing excision in pregnancy should excessive bleeding occur. Moreover, the fact that one woman is shown to refuse the procedure, despite Ajanpu’s comment that it is the fate of all women, does intimate that this practice does not receive wholehearted support, even though the woman concerned eventually complies. Thus, with small allusions such as these to the dangers inherent in such a practice, Nwapa’s apparent omniscient, non-judgemental narrative style is undercut. Nevertheless, Nwapa’s understated references to excision in this novel break new ground considering how few authors, even today, have commented upon it.

Moreover, there exists confirmation of Nwapa’s sentiments on excision in an interview alluded to in Tobe Levin’s article. The latter interviewed Flora Nwapa on this subject at the 1980 Frankfurt Book Fair, when she confided to Levin that, at that point in time, she believed that “the western media tended to exaggerate the extent of the problem.” However, later that year, Levin received a letter from Nwapa modifying her view – “the practice was indeed more prevalent (and the consequences graver) than she had imagined.” Nwapa’s approach to this practice in Efuru seems to reflect her earlier thoughts on the subject, although it is noteworthy that this practice is not mentioned in any of her subsequent novels.

Excision as a Site of Resistance: Muthoni Likimani’s They Shall be Chastized

The novel They Shall be Chastized by the Kenyan writer Muthoni Likimani, published in 1974, seems to be little known and is rarely included in critical works on African women writers. Although excision is not Likimani’s major focus, it does form an important part of her principal concerns, the effect of the colonial influence, notably
that of the Missionary church, on life in Kenya during the earlier part of this century. This novel is interesting in that it deals with both excision and male circumcision and, with regard to the former, we have both the indigenous and colonial view of the practice and also the opinions expressed by both sexes. In fact, the issue of excision is presented as being of major significance in the relationship between the British missionaries and the local people. Indeed, it led to a split between the missionaries and the indigenous leaders such as Kenyatta and the group involved in the radical “Muigwithania” newspaper. 

The first part of the novel concerns the attraction felt by a local boy, Kimori, for life at the nearby mission. He is the son of Kachungi, an important man in the area, and despite the latter’s disapproval, eventually converts to Christianity and becomes a pastor in the church. Likimani also explores the various beliefs of the Christian community, shown to be particularly splintered at the Evangelist convention which is held at the Missionary Centre at this time. Confusion is spread amongst the newly converted, who are unable to accommodate their traditional beliefs with the requirements of Christianity. An important example of this is the practice of polygamy and another is that of excision, as explored particularly in the latter part of the novel.

Likimani presents both excision and male circumcision as part of the customary life of the local people. Male circumcision is presented as an issue of vital importance in Kimori’s life, as he is trying to decide whether to remain in the local Christian community, which he finds attractive, or return to his indigenous culture where he is surrounded by his biological family. His father is very concerned that his son should be circumcised along with all the other boys in his age group, and Kimori eventually complies as he does not want to risk losing the benefits entailed by this rite of passage. These include respect from his male peers, and the possibility of being a leader. The importance of such “age-group” relations cannot be overstressed for the whole of Kikuyu life depends upon them, so exclusion would be absolutely crucial. In spite of the fact that Kimori decides to go forward with this ceremony, he does not do so wholeheartedly since the Christian faith, to which he also feels allegiance, regards such festivities as the work of the devil. He is thus split between the two cultures.
Kimori’s dilemma concerning his own circumcision is also reflected in his choice of wife, whether she should be excised as recommended by tribal culture, or not, in compliance with Missionary teaching. He decides to marry a woman from the Missionary community who has no relatives and whose origins are unknown, a catastrophe as far as his parents are concerned, where knowledge of one’s forebears is essential in avoiding unfortunate hereditary traits. In a rather ironic allusion to excision, Kimori’s mother hopes that at least her new daughter-in-law is excised. Yet confusion in her mind about the necessity of circumcision to childbirth is evident: “I am told that white women are never circumcized, yet they have babies anyway” (p.67). This linking of excision with the ability to deliver a healthy baby we have also seen in Nwapa’s Efuru.

Likimani further underlines the contentious nature of excision, alluding to the dispute in the local community when one of its local preachers, Samson, is accused by the Reverend Smith and his assistant Yohana, of having had his daughter, Salome, excised against the church’s preaching. Although this operation takes place without Samson’s knowledge, at the instigation of his sister, there is much consternation among the Christian community. Samson is persuaded by his sister of the necessity for this procedure as their mother, on her death-bed, has laid a curse on any girls in the family who might remain uncircumcised. Although a Christian Pastor, Samson recognises the importance of such traditional beliefs and endorses his sister’s actions. Reverend Smith calls a Church Council to discuss the matter as he is “sick” of what he calls, “this pagan behaviour” (p.84). The circumciser refuses to attend, threatening to “fix” Reverend Smith’s own wife who apparently “needs it” (p.86). Reference has been made previously in the novel to Mrs Smith’s independent spirit: not being always willing to wait on her husband and thereby causing the missionary converts to view her as dictatorial and the Reverend as a “henpecked” husband. This reference by the circumciser, then, supports the notion that Mrs Smith should be more subservient and tractable, and that undergoing circumcision will indeed achieve this. Kimori himself, trying to decide whether he should take a wife from his own or from the Missionary community, acknowledges that the former would be likely to be more obedient than the latter. It therefore seems that European or Western-educated women
are regarded as more independent minded. Excision is thus shown to be perceived as a means of rendering women more docile.

It is the sudden change in behaviour of female students at the Mission school after their circumcision which causes Miss Green, the headteacher, to become aware of its existence. She is chided by a local African teacher, Mr Obadiah, for purporting to know the girls she teaches so well, while understanding nothing about their culture. Part of the local community, he is the only person to realise that these girls have been excised. Miss Green’s reaction to this news is predictable: “Oh no! Please no! That pagan custom! That horrible operation on my girls!”(p.198). Ironically, excision is depicted here as a means whereby young girls become much more tractable, mature and wary of the opposite sex, particularly if that boy were not circumcised, thus achieving the more “ladylike” standards so valorised by Miss Green. However Mr Obadiah notices that such behaviour is accompanied by a deterioration in their academic performance. He nevertheless stresses the significance of excision for the indigenous community, citing the same sorts of arguments employed about male circumcision, namely lack of marital prospects for non-excised girls and non-acceptance into their community and age-groups. According to Mr Obadiah, to traditional people, uncircumcised girls or women are like children:

They are daring and they frequently look into a man’s eyes when they talk – a thing which a woman should not do. They argue like men. They talk too much. They sit carelessly exposing their thighs in the presence of boys, and they are not taught the value of a man, but take men as equals. They try to do what men do, and manage to do it sometimes better I am afraid. (p.199)

In other words, Mr Obadiah stresses that excised women must not regard themselves as equal to men nor act in what could possibly be construed as a sexual manner, nor attempt to take on more than their allotted tasks, for fear of showing up male inadequacy. This sexual subordination is also stressed when Mr Obadiah remarks that the girls’ attitude changes not because of the physical operation, but because of the education which accompanies it. His account of such an education is precisely that of female subordination to the male, including “never answering a man back, never to gaze at him when he is giving orders, never to harass him, making him look small which is a habit of Western women”(p.200). This slight against Western women is in the same vein as that against Mrs Smith. However, Mr Obadiah’s attitude towards
excision is slightly ambiguous, as he himself admits that he would be willing to marry an uncircumcised woman, but that he is an exception. Presumably therefore, if we believe that Mr Obadiah’s views have been conditioned by his Western education, it is only as young people go through such Western education that traditional practices such as excision may be challenged, which is also the case in Ngugi’s *The River Between*.

In Likimani’s Conclusion, the first-person narrator speaks for the first time to voice her opinion about the issues discussed. She notes that Miss Green is only able to see things from her own Western perspective and that, although Mr Obadiah is doing his best to enlighten her about traditional beliefs, he has little success. The narrator wryly acknowledges the increasing foothold of the Christian tradition, but remarks that it does not provide all the answers, citing monogamy as an example, which she sees as unsuccessful. Interestingly, the narrator ends her Conclusion with a specific reference to excision, stating that people such as Miss Green, while preaching against it, do not understand the humiliations experienced by unexcised girls. Even if a man dared to marry such a girl, he would be ridiculed, such women being considered unclean and unworthy. In this way the narrator would seem to be endorsing the fact that such customs should be left well alone. However, pragmatically, the narrator also acknowledges that as Christianity increasingly makes inroads into indigenous communities, those who do progress in their own societies are the ones educated at Western Missions. Education therefore is something that could not be rejected and, presumably, in time, will alter many aspects of traditional beliefs, including excision.

As we have seen, Likimani’s treatment of excision in *They Shall Be Chastized* serves mainly to depict the differences between the indigenous and the colonising culture. It primarily concerns a group of girls rather than any particular individual, except in the case of Salome, a local pastor’s daughter, whose excision is a source of much controversy in the community, but we are never provided with an insight into the girl’s own feelings. Likewise, in *Efuru*, although excision concerns an individual we are never given her opinion. However, in Ngugi’s novel *The River Between* although, as in the previous two novels, the narrator is omniscient, we are given the point of view of two young women, one of whom decides to obey her parents and not be
circumcised, and her younger sister who decides to rebel against her parents and go ahead with the procedure.

Ngugi’s novel is very similar to Likimani’s in its underlining of the importance of Western education in the missionary endeavour and the alienation thereby created. It reflects the historical encounter between the Gikuyu and the missionaries, with especial emphasis on the religious conflict relating to the practice of excision. As we saw in They Shall Be Chastized, whereas to the Christians this custom seems primitive and barbaric, to the indigenous peoples it is an important rite of passage through which both boys and girls reached the status of manhood and womanhood. As in the previous novel, excision is considered a prerequisite not just for marriage, but also for entry into the age-sets and full membership of tribal institutions.38

In The River Between, the attitude of two sisters from a family of converts is explored and compared, that of Nyambura, who is obedient to her parents’ wishes, and that of Muthoni, who defies her father and becomes excised. Muthoni herself appears only briefly but her excision and resultant death are of paramount importance. Nyambura’s attitude towards excision is that it is sinful: “It was a pagan rite from which she and her sister had been saved”(p.23) whereas Muthoni’s response is that she wants to be a “real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges”(p.26). The girls’ father, Joshua, has been baptised into the Missionary community as a young man, seemingly based on fear “of what would happen to those who rejected Jesus, burning in hell for ever and ever”(p.29). The issue of whether excision is linked to submission, as discussed in They Shall Be Chastized, is also apparent in the reference to Joshua’s wife, who hastens to instruct her daughters that they must obey their father. Her submissive nature is here attributed by the narrator to the Christian religion. She herself had learnt the value of Christian submission, and she thought every other believer had the same attitude to life. Not that she questioned life. It had given her a man and in her own way she loved and cared for him. Her faith and belief in God were coupled with her fear of Joshua. But that was religion and it was the way things were ordered. However, one could still tell by her eyes that this was a religion learnt and accepted; inside the true Gikuyu woman was sleeping. (p.34)
The last sentence is obviously authorial comment and is a reinforcement of the narrator's belief that Gikuyu women are not naturally submissive. Indeed, this attitude is underlined in the folktale told to the main protagonist, Waiyaki, as a boy by his father, Chege, concerning a time in the distant past when women ruled the land but abused their power. Chege informs his son that the men rebelled, taking advantage when the women were pregnant to overthrow their rule. Moreover, Chege stresses that such matters are still remembered, forewarning his son of the need to keep women subservient to their men, lest history repeat itself. It is interesting to note Waiyaki's reaction: "It was then Waiyaki understood why his mother owned nothing" (p. 15). The disjunction between women's former power and their now total lack of it is tellingly exposed in the child's innocent comment. Of note in this folktale seems to be the grudging acknowledgement of women's power, one that had to be dismantled because it was feared. Jomo Kenyatta, in Facing Mount Kenya, also cites this same tribal legend, making it clear that the only reason that women attained such power was a device to keep the original male ruler, Gikuyu, in place as "the power behind the throne" so to speak. The reason that Gikuyu must relinquish part of his authority is because of his inability to father sons, only daughters. Consequently, Mogai [The Divider of the Universe] provides Gikuyu with men that his daughters can marry on condition that these men agree to live under a matriarchal system. Moreover, Kenyatta, while mentioning the way that women abused their power, adds that they also practised polyandry and that "many men were put to death for committing adultery or other minor offences." Immediately afterwards the system of polyandry was abolished and that of polygamy established.

Whereas in They Shall be Chastized missionary-educated women are regarded as more independent, and indigenous non-Christian women more submissive to their husbands, Ngugi's representation of this issue is less clear-cut. Both of Joshua's daughters are mission-educated and one is submissive and the other rebellious. His own wife, although a practising Christian, is entirely submissive, but would not have received a Western education. When Joshua learns of Muthoni's excision he gives her the ultimatum to return and seek forgiveness or no longer be acknowledged by him. Although his wife does not agree with him, she says nothing. Is her submissiveness due more to her Christian beliefs or her tribal loyalties? It may be the
combined influence of both as obedience is equally required by a husband from his wife as it is from a congregational member by her pastor, or by extension to the higher authority, the Christian God, that the latter represents.

Muthoni's death, as the result of her excision, provokes not only an immediate conflict within Gikuyu society but she quickly becomes a legend: "Stories grew up around her name. Some people said that she had not actually died of the wound, but that she had been poisoned by the missionaries"(p.58). In this manner we see the focus of blame being displaced from the indigenous community onto the missionaries, and the cause of death from infection after excision, to poisoning. This rumour confirms the elders in their antagonism towards this new religion, compounded by the fact that taxes are being introduced by the colonisers at that time: "The death of Muthoni had clearly shown that nothing but evil would come out of any association with the new faith"(p.58). According to the Christian converts "Muthoni was an evil spirit sent to try the faithful"(p.58). In fact, Muthoni's death causes the Christians to take a new hard line, Joshua declaring that circumcision was "wholly evil"(59) and threatening to ban from the church anybody connected to the practice, thus alienating many converts who did not wish to abandon all their former customs. It is ironical that Muthoni's death comes only to symbolise religious and tribal conflict whereas in fact she is attempting to reconcile her Christian faith and her indigenous upbringing. Her dying words bear testimony to the fact that she has personally at least achieved such reconciliation: "[T]ell Nyambura I see Jesus. And I am a woman, beautiful in the tribe"(p.53).

An interesting article, Lyn Thomas's "Ngaitana: I will circumcise myself," mentioned earlier, discusses the historical background of the female circumcision debate in Kenya. Although during the setting of both Kenyan novels excision was legal, the Christian converts banned it amongst their own people. Thomas discusses the 1956 ban on clitoridectomy by the Njuri Ncheke of Meru, an officially sanctioned local council of male leaders. Just as Muthoni in The River Between insists on being circumcised in opposition to her parents' and to the Church's wishes, many adolescent girls defied this ban, even attempting to excise one another. Because these girls went without the preparations and celebrations associated with previous ceremonies, as
well as abandoning the traditional instruments used in its practice, Thomas notes that many inhabitants of Meru doubted the legitimacy of these initiations. Her contention is that “Whereas the international controversy has largely cast girls and women as victims, examination of adolescent girls’ efforts to excise each other situates girls and women as central actors.” This is exactly the light in which Muthoni’s decision to be excised can be read. However, whereas in the former case the young girls tended to practise a much less severe form of excision, in the example of Muthoni, the agency bestowed upon her results in her death. Also, as Thomas herself admits, the girls’ mothers or circumcisors, known as “atami” often completed the procedure, perhaps with a view to reasserting older women’s control over the whole process. As we are reminded frequently in writing by African women writers, patriarchal values are not just the preserve of African men but are also perpetuated by older women with status in the community.

Muthoni’s death results in her becoming a legend among her people. Just as Nnu Ego’s death in The Joys of Motherhood is symbolic of the destruction of all her hopes and dreams in connection with motherhood, so can Muthoni’s death be regarded as symbolic of all those wasted sacrifices by women on the altar of “womanhood.” Indeed, it is very noticeable that the two reasons given by Muthoni for her desire to be excised are, firstly, to belong to her tribe and secondly, to be able to marry, and in a sense, for the majority of African women, the former is unrealisable without the latter, access to full tribal membership depending upon excision, as has been discussed. In order for the hopes of women like Muthoni to be fulfilled, the attitude of their prospective partners would need to change. In They Shall be Chastized it must be remembered that Mr Obadiah was an exception among African men in being prepared to contemplate marrying an uncircumcised woman. Moreover, Thomas suggests that by the end of the 1950s nothing had changed in this regard. Information she gleaned in an interview with Charity Tirindi in 1975, points to the fact that even school-educated men in the 1950s refused to marry non-circumcised women. In The River Between Waiyaki’s father sends him to the Missionary school to be educated so that he will be better able to resist the colonising influence and yet Waiyaki is unconcerned that Nyambura is not excised. However, this is a major source of irritation for his
followers and they point to a time when “A day would come when all these Irigu would be circumcised by force, to rid the land of impurities”(p.121).

The questions raised in these two novels by the issue of excision centre not only on questions of gender, but also on wider issues of colonialism. Just as African women often cite solidarity with their men as a means of combating the dire effects of colonialism, so too can the issue of excision be viewed in The River Between. In the article already referred to, Thomas cites the anthropologist Janice Boddy’s contention that women’s adherence to excision is in order to preserve “bargaining tools with which to negotiate subaltern status and enforce their complementarity with men.” Thomas states that such a scenario is tempting with regard to the 1956 ban on clitoridectomy, especially as it took place amid the events of the Mau Mau rebellion, a time of severe anti-government protest in Kenya. Moreover, according to Thomas, historians have interpreted the controversy surrounding clitoridectomy during the 1920s and 1930s as crucial to the emergence of nationalist politics within Kenya. However, Thomas sees the Mau Mau rebellion as providing “the context, not the causes, for passage and defiance of the ban.” Further, Thomas argues that “[w]hen Kenyan historiography, the resistance paradigm reduced clitoridectomy disputes to political contests among men about women,” citing various examples of women’s exclusion from this whole question. One such incident involved the first woman Councillor appointed to the African District Council in 1951, who was asked by the District Commissioner not to participate in discussions concerning the ban on clitoridectomy, and she was erroneously recorded as not being present at the two meetings discussing this in 1956.

In fact, this exclusion of women from the political process can be justly attributed to the situation in both They Shall Be Chastized and The River Between. In the former novel, it is both the male church elders and the male indigenous court council which rule on the situation, admittedly taking note in the latter court of the female circumcisor. However, she is excluded from the political debate. Likewise, we are given no information about any of the excised girls’ views on the matter. In the latter novel, unlike the male protagonist, Kimori, we are provided with little insight into Muthoni’s character, and her death, as we have seen, becomes a purely symbolical
matter, fought out in the public, that is, male forum. Neither is there any questioning
at all of the dangers suffered by women who undergo this rite, many of whom will,
like Muthoni, die.\textsuperscript{55} Towards the end of the novel, when Waiyaki is reflecting on the
problems besetting both himself and his people and trying to find answers to them,
including the controversy caused by excision, he muses:

Circumcision of women was not important as a physical operation. It was what it did
inside a person. It could not be stopped overnight. Patience and, above all,
education were needed. If the white man’s religion made you abandon a custom and
then did not give you something else of equal value, you become lost. An attempt at
resolution of the conflict would only kill you, as it did Muthoni. (p.142)

It could however be argued that it is indeed the physical operation which does kill
Muthoni, whatever her personal motives. As Levin remarks, “what precisely is meant
by ‘not important’? That clitoridectomy is trivial [...] Or does it mean non-essential,
unnecessary for effecting that transformation ‘inside a person’ which the rite of
passage is intended to accomplish.”\textsuperscript{56} It could be further argued that this comment is
very much in line with Florence Stratton’s critique of another of Ngugi’s novels, \textit{Devil
on the Cross}, that “While women serve as an index of the state of the nation, men
make up the nation’s citizenry,”\textsuperscript{57} for it is indeed Waiyaki who is a leader of men.

In relation to the gender dynamics in \textit{The River Between} it could be posited that Ngugi
does in fact provide a continuance of the female point of view in the embodiment of
Nyambura, Muthoni’s sister. However, the one occasion when she is assertive and
finally rebels against her father, it is in order to be with Waiyaki, who views her yet
again as a symbol:

And Nyambura stood there looking as if she were the embodiment of serene beauty,
symbolized by the flooding moon and the peace around. Suddenly Waiyaki felt as if
the burning desires of his heart would be soothed if only he could touch her, just
touch her hand or hair. (p.77)

As we clearly see in this extract, not only is Nyambura considered a symbol of beauty,
but also one which possesses magical or other worldly qualities, that is, she is not
endowed with strictly rational non-symbolic attributes. At the conclusion of the novel
Nyambura is also sacrificed, this time in the struggle for control of the tribes which
Waiyaki himself is involved in, for as an unexcised woman she is considered unclean.
Ngugi’s two female protagonists, whether they choose to be excised or not, clearly
play the roles of sacrificial victims.
Excision – an act of love? Aman’s Aman

Aman not only recounts the author’s own eventful life up until the age of 17, but also encompasses the stories of others in her family, more particularly her mother. She tells of her unhappiness at school, her love affair with a young Italian boy who is severely beaten by members of her extended family, her various means of employment, her excision ceremony, her two marriages and divorces, her life as a runaway when she resorts to prostitution and, finally, her third marriage and life in a new country, Tanzania.

Aman’s excision takes place when her two aunts decide to include her in the excision ceremony of their two daughters, her own mother having decided to delay excision due to financial hardship. Aman’s aunts are worried about what others might think if she is not invited to participate, especially as Aman is older than her cousins. So, exceptionally, the mother is absent from the proceedings. Aman herself is somewhat reluctant: “I wanted to – all the girls my age wanted to because it’s shame not to – but I was afraid, and besides, my mama didn’t want me circumcised today” (p.54). Aman’s misgivings are not only inspired by her mother’s absence, but also her own fear. Moreover, it is evident that her actions are impelled by a desire to conform to social pressures, because of the “shame” involved in not doing so. These attitudes are similar to those discussed in Efuru, and there are other similarities in the two novels: the necessity of bathing before the ceremony, matters of hygiene, measures for healing and disinfection, as well as the food she is given to eat.\(^5^8\)

The description of the actual ceremony is different, however, as the reader is exposed to a first-person account of the ordeal of excision and infibulation. This difference also stems from the description of the religious aspects of the ceremony,\(^5^9\) apparent in the presence of the sheiks who read the Koran over the children as they have their hair shaved. The children are told that they must be good, that they will not feel pain, that they are to be given gold and money and that the best behaved child will receive the most. Aman, the older narrator, comments: “You know, they were deceiving us
children" (p.54). Whether she is referring to the pain or gold, or both, is not clear, although as she describes being covered in gold and money during the ceremony, she is more likely to be referring to the painful nature of the procedure, described in detail. Another noticeable factor is the shame involved if one is not brave. One of the women, whose task is to hold the children, tells her: “It’s not a big thing, it’s not that painful [...] Don’t let your family down. Don’t let yourself down. The children will laugh at you tomorrow if you cry today” (p.55). Again, the pain is minimised and Aman’s honour is appealed to as well as that of her family’s. A rather menacing atmosphere is also evoked as the circumciser’s words reveal a veiled threat: “She said that if I was bad she could be bad – and while she was talking to me like that, she was getting out her knives and all the other equipment and wiping them to make them clean” (p.55). Aman describes the removal of her clitoris as incorporating that of her whole body: “My body was gone in a second [...] I could hear shuuu...like the sound when they are slicing meat – just like that was the way she sliced my body [...] Oh, Rahima, I thought I was going to die” (p.56). The exclamation to Rahima, to whom she is telling her story, is interjected at times of high emotion, as at this time. During the procedure, while the guests are singing joyfully, Aman perceives her rite of transition into womanhood less as a new beginning than as a death sentence: “Every time I wanted to cry, I looked around to see if someone would help, but I just saw smiling faces [...] I opened my mouth and pretended I was laughing, but I was dying inside” (p.56).

The reason behind excision, noted in the other fictional works, is revealed in a rather matter-of-fact manner by Aman when she mentions the necessity of the “hole” left by the circumciser being the correct size so that “your husband will know you are a virgin” (p.59). According to Aman, “A girl who is sewn won’t play around, because she is scared of the pain, and she’s scared her family will be able to tell when they check her every week” (p.59). Aman reveals in these words how the forbidden nature of the sexual act becomes self-imposed because of the pain involved. Ironically, though, Aman discloses later in her narrative, that, after having been raped, it was an easy enough matter to be restitched and consequently hide the fact that she was not still a virgin. In fact, according to Calixthe Beyala, one of the reasons given for infibulation is to safeguard young women from being subjected to rape, but she notes
that it is not a safeguard from attack, as “un homme armé d’un couteau peut aussi bien violer une femme infibulée”\(^{60}\) [a man armed with a knife is also able to rape an infibulated woman].

This insistence on the “purity” of the bride by means of infibulation raises the question of her “defibulation” upon marriage. Aman has contracted her marriage for monetary gain, rather than as a love match, to a much older man for whom she feels no physical attraction, so she attempts to avoid her husband’s advances by constantly running away from the marital home. When she can avoid her husband no longer, she is spared the sexual act because he cannot penetrate her due to her tight infibulation. Subsequently she is horrified to discover that he has bought handcuffs, chains, scissors and a razor, and realises that he intends to cut her open. However, her husband agrees that the woman who carried out her excision and infibulation should perform the task. Just as in the original ceremony, which is only attended by women and children, with the exception of the sheiks, none of the men are present “because this was women’s business now”\(^{p.140}\). However Aman still manages to control her husband’s access to her body by refusing to let the circumciser cut a very big hole. In this manner she is able to subvert the system to her own advantage and, not surprisingly, the marriage soon ends in divorce.

Aman at no times questions the necessity for her excision and infibulation. Indeed, she seems to have internalised the necessity for it, repeating comments she has heard that men prefer Somali women to non-excised Europeans and she herself claims: “I know myself we smell better and are less dirty than women who are uncircumcised”\(^{p.280}\). In her mind then, and the minds of others, Aman equates being excised with being sexually desirable. Even though Aman never criticises the practice of excision, she occasionally betrays some kind of sense of loss, as when she refers to making love to her Italian lover, Carlo, at one point: “We had a good time again, but it was...I don’t know, a part was missing”\(^{p.212}\).\(^{61}\) Moreover, Aman’s labours in childbirth are long and difficult and the doctor has to cut her several times. Is this a result of her infibulation? Aman makes no comment.\(^{62}\) Certainly Aman does not expound upon the dangers associated with excision in the way that other writers do. Although she admits that she is sick afterwards with a fever, she is proud of her
new-found status in society and believes the intentions behind the act were good ones, as when she reassures her mother: “They did it because they love me” (p. 57).

Aman also points to ideological and political ramifications, when she comments on the tendency of white people to attempt to educate Africans. She asks:

But would they accept it if I educated them to circumcise? This is my culture, my religion, and I don’t believe another nation can take away another nation’s culture. If Somali women change, it will be a change done by us, among us. When they order us to stop, tell us what we must do, it is offensive to the black person or the Muslim person who believes in circumcision. To advise is good, but not to order. (p. 281)

This seemingly unbreachable gap between the “insider/outsider” dichotomy is also alluded to by Katherine Fishburn, a Western critic who has written a monograph on Buchi Emecheta’s work. In Emecheta’s novel Double Yoke there is an allusion to the practice of both male circumcision and female excision. In this novel the female protagonist, Nko, discusses her boyfriend Ete with some girlfriends and the conversation turns to sex. The sex organs of white men who are not circumcised are described by one of the girls as resembling “wet intestines.” To this, Nko replies, “And their women are not clitorised...awful.” Fishburn comments that, reading this passage, “the text loses [her], all [her] efforts to remain open to its newness notwithstanding.” She refers to such a situation as “the classic moment of refusal and rupture.” Do Fishburn’s comments then suggest an impasse between insiders and outsiders with regard to this practice? Although it would appear so, at least with regard to one Western critic, Fishburn does confess that the fact that she writes at such length about her reactions to Emecheta’s narrative, suggests that in spite of her initial moment of “refusal,” she is at least made to confront such issues.

The Personal and Political: Waris Dirie’s Desert Flower

In the most recent autobiography by a Somali woman, Waris Dirie’s Desert Flower, although it is similar in some respects to Aman, especially in the narrator’s rebellion against marriage to a much older man and her subsequent flight, the attitude towards excision is rather different. Instead of unquestioning acceptance in Aman we are presented with overt criticism in Desert Flower. Thus the latter is much more similar,
in many respects, to Keita's *Rebelle*, the last novel to be discussed in this chapter, in that both works follow the adventures of their protagonists from their respective African countries to life in Europe and/or the United States. Moreover, both protagonists return to their original countries in search of their respective mothers, after a long and painful separation. What distinguishes Dirie's autobiography from Keita's novel is that it is very much more "political" with respect to her appointment as a goodwill ambassador to the United Nations.

Dirie's autobiography is a full account of her life up to her early twenties and her reunion with her mother. It recounts her life as a child growing up in the Somali desert with her parents and eleven brothers and sisters, living a precarious nomadic existence, in the constant search for water both for themselves and their animals. Her flight from her family is due to the prospect of marrying a much older man. She cannot refuse this offer of marriage but imagines what life would be like left as a young widow with no prospect of remarriage, forbidden by Somali culture. Fleeing across the desert, then staying with relatives in Mogadishu, she accompanies one of her uncles, the Somali ambassador to London, to this city. In his household she is little more than a servant until he and his family return to Somalia four years later and Dirie refuses to leave with them. Having been "discovered" by a well-known photographer she eventually becomes a top model and, in return for their help in tracking down her mother in the Somali desert, she agrees to be the subject of a BBC documentary. Subsequently she marries and has a son, and her autobiography ends with her reflections on the practice of excision.

As in *Aman*, we have a first-person account, not only of a child's own excision and infibulation, but also its effects, both short-term and long-term. The chapter entitled "Becoming a Woman" stresses the nature of the procedure which all women must undergo in order to be able to marry and bear children. As in *Aman*, Warie the child has no difficulty accepting her fate. She even begs her mother to let her be excised early for, although she has no idea what this entails, she feels that she is missing out on all the attentions being bestowed upon her elder sister, also called Aman, who is to be excised in order to be ready for marriage. In this way Dirie underlines how young girls are naïve in their expectations and completely unaware both of what this practice
involves and its ramifications. Unknown to her mother, Dirie follows her and her sister to the place where Aman is to be excised and is horrified at the events she witnesses, including her sister’s attempt to escape, but even then she soon forgets and continues to beg her mother to let her be excised.

Dirie’s excision and infibulation, like that of her sister, takes place away from her family’s encampment early one morning. The older narrator comments that she now knows why this should be so: “They want to cut them before anybody wakes up, so nobody else will hear them scream” (p.44). Even though she becomes terrified as she lies upon a rock, held by her mother, she remembers that her sister’s flight was to no avail and decides to make the best of the situation. Moreover, she is desperate to please her mother who asks her to be very good and brave as otherwise she will not be able to hold her. The pain of the procedure causes her to faint as does the infibulation. She recovers afterwards in a small hut, her legs tied together, scarcely able to eat as she recovers from the worst of the ordeal, although her wound becomes infected. She remembers subsequently that her behaviour after this event changes drastically. Whereas previously she was full of energy and athletic, she becomes careworn and sedentary.

This scene is painful to read, made even more so by the depth of detail provided. Quite apart from the description of the procedure itself, the author tells of the pain of urinating for the first time, the circumciser having left a hole of only the diameter of a matchstick for her urinary and menstrual flows so as to be assured that “she could never have sex until [she] was married” (p.47). Moreover, as she recovers, she takes note of her surroundings: “I turned my head toward the rock; it was drenched with blood, as if an animal had been slaughtered there. Pieces of my meat, my sex, lay on top, drying undisturbed in the sun” (p.46). When she returns later to the rock to find it bare, she imagines her sexual organs having been eaten by vultures, evoking Kourouma’s description, in his novel, of an excision ceremony attended by his female protagonist, Salimata. As the latter waits in line to be excised she remembers the girls from her village whose excision had resulted in their deaths. She hears the shouts of the matrons, the cries of the birds of prey: “Vultures had come flapping out of the mist and the trees, drawn by the scent of blood. They circled overhead with wild cries.”
Amidst this clamour Salimata is excised and, like Dirie and her sister, loses consciousness.

It is while Dirie is living in England that the longer terms effects of her infibulation become apparent, such as very painful and long periods which cause her to faint. When a gynaecologist offers to operate to widen the canal to make her more comfortable, she is dissuaded from doing so by the interpreter, a Somali male, who does not just interpret the consultant’s words, but constantly interjects with his own disapproving comments. Years later, while working as a model, she does undergo this procedure. Although life becomes easier in some aspects she still has sexual problems as evinced in the following quotation, when she confesses that one day she would like a husband and a family of her own: “as long as I was sewn up, I was very much closed to the idea of a relationship, shut away into myself. It was as if the stitches prevented any man from entering me – physically or emotionally” (p.150). Subsequently Dirie tried to have the damage done to her repaired by doctors, but without success. She is under no illusion about why this procedure is performed, to maintain a woman’s purity by ensuring that she cannot enjoy sex.

Calixthe Beyala’s Tu t’appelleras Tanga: An Exploitative Approach

In the first of the two francophone novels to be studied, Beyala’s second novel, Tu t’appelleras Tanga, excision is presented as just one example of a series of oppressive abuses perpetrated upon Tanga’s body as well as one of a series of betrayals of a daughter by her mother. The consequences of excision are reflected in Tanga’s fragile psychological state and in the frigidity she experiences in her sexual relationships. This sexual frigidity is almost certainly also a result of her rape by her father. Her later excision at the instigation of her mother is a further betrayal of familial love, both betrayals involving the physical abuse of her body. The following quotation illustrates these points, as well as other issues arising from Tanga’s excision. The citation occurs just after Tanga has met a young man, Hassan, who correctly assumes that she is a prostitute:
Au “Combien?” lancé négligemment par Hassan, je sens cuire mes joues. La honte me prend le cœur. Elle monte de la gorge, me noue la tête. Jusqu’ici, je n’ai eu qu’une honte, la vieille ma mère. Cette honte est mon souffle non viable. Elle me persécute, me poursuit, depuis le jour où la vieille ma mère m’a allongée sous le bananier pour que je m’accomplisse sous le geste de l’arracheuse de clitoris. Je la vois encore, la vieille ma mère, éclatante dans son kaba immaculé, un fichu noir dans les cheveux, criant à tous les dieux: “Elle est devenue femme, elle est devenue femme. Avec ça, ajoute-t-elle en tapotant ses fesses, elle gardera tous les hommes.”


(At the words ‘How much?’, carelessly tossed out by Hassan, I feel my cheeks tingle. Shame grabs my heart. Rises in my throat, ties my head in knots. Until now I felt shame for only one thing, my mother old one. That shame is my breath which has no hope of survival. It persecutes me, chases after me, since the day that my mother old one laid me down underneath the banana tree so that I would be fulfilled at the hands of the clitoris snatcher. I can see her still, my mother old one, shimmering in her immaculate kaba, a black scarf in her hair, crying out to every god: ‘She has become a woman, she has become a woman. With that,’ as she taps her behind, ‘she’ll keep any man.’ I didn’t weep. I didn’t say a thing. I fell heir to the blood between my legs. To a hole between my thighs. All that I was left with was the law of oblivion. Time passed, I was becoming accustomed to that part of me that was gone. I kidnapped the horde of memories. I tied them up with string. I shoved them deep inside the drawers of time. And here suddenly the horde re-emerged, in front of Hassan. It opened its drawers where watches were nestling, millions of watches, each one marking a different stage of my existence, p.12).

This passage is significant in the detail it provides about the protagonist’s state of mind, both past and present. What is most striking is her sense of personal shame when accosted by a man she finds attractive. Until this time, despite being forced into prostituting herself to support her family, she admits to only ever having felt shame on behalf of her mother who instigated the excision. Such shame appears to derive from the fact that it was her own mother who physically laid her down underneath the banana tree so that she could be excised. Obviously Tanga’s emotions stem from feelings of betrayal by the person whom she would have expected to protect her, rather than subject her to such an ordeal. This sense of shame, as well as betrayal, is also described by the Egyptian writer, Nawal El Saadawi, in relation to her own excision, in an extremely vivid and graphic account. The young child, aged six, is snatched from her bed in the middle of the night by men whom she believes must be
thieves about to murder her. She is carried, struggling, to the bathroom where she is excised on the cold tiles of the bathroom floor:

I did not know what they had cut off from my body, and I did not try to find out. I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her, I could not be mistaken, in flesh and blood, right in the midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them, as though they had not participated in slaughtering her daughter just a few moments ago.71

It is thus the act of betrayal by her mother, rendered untenable by her mother’s jubilation, which is so upsetting for the young girl.

Tanga’s recollection of her mother is striking. One notes the dramatic description of her as “shimmering in her immaculate kaba,” which shows her mother has dressed specially for the occasion, choosing traditional dress in keeping with a traditional practice, but this ritual not entailing any of the traditional celebrations that are normally associated with the ceremony. Moreover, the use of the term “immaculate,” which signifies without blemish, and morally pure, ironically contrasts with the mother’s immoral intentions and is in sharp opposition to Tanga’s bloodied body. Again, in contrast to her silent daughter, Tanga’s mother is extremely vocal in her pride as she shouts to the gods to witness such an auspicious occasion. The reference to her “mother old one” which is used throughout the novel, and which is also present in the expression “father old one,” is rather ambiguous. On the one hand, it reflects the respect shown to the elderly in African societies; on the other, it appears to suggest the heroine’s disrespect, particularly as she never has anything complimentary to say about either of her parents. Such denominations undermine the parental role and the discrepancy between the parents’ actions and their prescribed role is apparent for all to witness.

The excision itself is described by the narrator as an act whereby she is “fulfilled at the hands of the clitoris snatcher.” Such wording is ambiguous. She is to be fulfilled, a word full of positive connotations, suggesting sexual fulfilment, but by means of a clitoris “snatcher,” a term which is indicative of violence and even unlawfulness. It also suggests the carelessness of the circumciser, determined to perform the procedure in haste. The mother’s reaction is one of jubilation, firstly because her daughter has
become a woman, since it is equivalent to the purpose of male circumcision, where
the boy passes into adulthood, and secondly, because it links her daughter’s
womanhood to the sexual role of being able to keep a man. Unlike the Kenyan novels
studied, the suggestion here is that the act of excision is synonymous with sexual
activity. This point is further underlined when the mother rather crudely slaps her
backside. In the previous novels discussed excision is a passage into adulthood and in
Efuru it suggests readiness for motherhood. Another equally strict moral requirement
in certain cultures is the girl’s virginity. In the urban slums depicted by Beyala the
value of virginity is no longer relevant, only the buying power of the prostitute.

This passage also strongly suggests that excision is “a woman’s lot,” as it was
perceived in Efuru, since it is here described as an inheritance bequeathed to her from
previous generations, as is evident in Tanga’s statement already quoted above: “I fell
heir to the blood between my legs. To a hole between my thighs.” The hole between
Tanga’s thighs may symbolise the abyss into which her life is henceforward projected,
whilst the blood between her thighs is not only a manifestation of the violence
perpetrated on her body at the moment of the excision, but also a reminder of her
father’s rape, he who “plus tard [...] m’écartèlera au printemps de mes douze
ans”(p.50) [would later [...] rip me apart in the budding of my twelfth year, p.30]. It
also foreshadows her future life as a prostitute where her clients “se relayaient autour
de moi, sur moi... Travail à la chaîne. Des yeux comme des billes. Le vice vrillé
dans mes reins”(p.110) [would take over from each other around me, on top of me... An
assembly line. Eyes like billiard balls. Vice screwed into my loins,” p.72). The
disjunction between what is normally bequeathed, something valuable, is thus
rendered more shocking. The idea of suffering as peculiar to the state of womanhood
is also apparent in El Saadawi’s account, when the narrator is helpless in protecting
her younger sister from also undergoing the ordeal, as the looks between them seem to
signify:

I could see my sister’s face held between the big rough hands. It had a deathly pallor
and her wide black eyes met mine for a split second, a glance of dark terror which I
can never forget. A moment later and she was gone, behind the door of the bathroom
where I had just been. The look we exchanged seemed to say: ‘Now we know what
it is. Now we know where lies our tragedy. We were born of a special sex, the
female sex. We are destined in advance to taste of misery, and to have a part of our
body torn away by cold, unfeeling cruel hands.”
Tanga's reaction to the excision is one of numbness quickly followed by one of oblivion, feelings that are also common to the autobiographical accounts to be discussed. She also intimates the effects of the procedure. She becomes immune to her situation, but has managed to "kidnap the many memories" presumably of what life was like when she felt herself to be physically and emotionally intact. The fact that she has to "kidnap" her memories suggests that this is not an easy, openly effected procedure but one which entails stealth and endeavour; for her it is time captured for self-contemplation amidst the ugliness of life working as a prostitute in the neighbourhood slums. Indeed, this sense of having to capture time is furthered by her need to shut these memories away into "drawers of time." However, the narrator remarks that these memories are tied with string, suggesting that they are not impenetrable, even though they are "shoved deep inside the drawers of time." The reference to time, reinforced by the image of drawers that are opened up to reveal millions of watches, each one marking a different stage of Tanga's existence, seems to suggest that her life has been put on hold until this time, that it is not until her encounter with Hassan that "suddenly" these former repressed memories are released, which results in a measure of healing. In the sexual encounter which follows, unlike her previous couplings, she is able to experience some form of sexual pleasure.

Before their sexual encounter, when Hassan takes Tanga to a bar and he makes it clear that he wishes to sleep with her, she intimates that sexual fulfilment will be impossible for her to experience as her "sexe est enseveli sous un bananier depuis huit ans"(p.28) [genitals have been entombed underneath a banana tree for eight years, p.15]. Hassan's response is that he "ir[a] le déterrer. [Il] le polir[a]. [Il] enlèver[a] les ans. Il acquerra l'éclat de sa première aube"(p.28) [will exhume them. [He]'ll polish them and take the years away. They will acquire the flush of their earliest beginning, p.15). It is interesting to note the unusual, rather ironical language used in this conversation. Such language is also both poetical and solemn. It is suggestive of not only death, but of rebirth. Perhaps Beyala is suggesting that a new vocabulary is required to designate the situation of the excised heroine which has hitherto been so little explored.
After her encounter with Hassan, Tanga hopes for a more fulfilling life, while also acknowledging to herself that she needs to give it some direction. Whereas previously she has slept with many men, she will now devote herself to one: “je transformerai mes mensonges en vérité. Il suffit de les codifier avec précision, de les ciseler. Ainsi, l’homme a construit son monde, fabriqué son histoire” (p.36) [I’ll transform my lies into the truth. All I need to do is codify them, carve them out very carefully. That is how man has constructed his world, [fabricated] his history, p.20]. However, at the same time, one senses in this assertion that she will in some way be betraying herself, for in her assertion that man has “constructed” his world and “fabricated” his history there is a suggestion of falsity and an abuse of power. While a man’s sense of identity of himself is as a participator in, and producer of, history, a woman’s identity is constructed through the geography of her body: “Je prendrai le spectacle de mes dépouilles passées, je glisserai vers elles, je soulèverai leur pagne, je frotterai leur clitoris, j’incendierai le plaisir” (p.37) [I’ll take the spectacle of my [sexual remains], slide towards [them], lift up [their] pagne, rub [their] clitoris, set fire to pleasure, p.20]. In this case Tanga’s new-found hope of freedom derives from an action instigated by herself: her past life, seen in terms of enforced sexual availability is attacked by her present self who joyfully reenacts an auto-erotic sexual act and in her imagination her clitoris is intact, producing sexual pleasure, a happiness denied her until then. Sexual fulfilment is linked to her own agency, the possibility of which is denied her when she is pinned to the ground as a child by her mother and excised.

The exploration of the psychological effects of Tanga’s excision recurs in the novel and is itself symbolic of the protagonist’s shattered childhood and exploitation by her parents, as is evident in her self-questioning: “Comment lui dire dans mon monde, la mère et le père acceptent qu’il m’assiège et me boursoufle pourvu qu’il y ait le gain? Comment lui dire l’entaille sanglante de l’enfance mutilée?” (p.35) [How can I tell him that in my world both mother and father accept that he will besiege me and cause me to swell up as long as it brings material gain? How can I tell him about the bloody slashing of a mutilated childhood?, p.19]. The critic Eloise Brière also refers to this aspect of betrayal in her discussion of this novel. According to her, referring to Tanga’s mother: “Le comportement de cette mère moderne illustre alors une fois de plus que la femme-fillette du monde urbain contemporain africain est sans
protection." [The behaviour of this modern mother thus illustrates yet again that the 'woman-young girl' of the contemporary urban African world is without protection].

Other writers, including Nawal El Saadawi, have written about the psychological trauma resulting from excision. The act perpetrated on her body affected El Saadawi for a long time: "I had a feeling of insecurity, of the unknown waiting for me at every step I took into the future." The phobia continued into married life where she felt deprived "from enjoying the fullness of [her] sexuality and the completeness of life that can only come from all round psychological equilibrium." The ill effects recurred when she worked as a rural doctor, often having to treat young girls who bled profusely after being excised, and many of whom lost their lives or suffered from acute or chronic infections. "And most of them, if not all, became the victims later on of sexual or mental distortions as a result of this experience.""77

Before examining a second novel by a Sub-Saharan African novelist, it is appropriate to refer first to the Lebanese writer, Evelyn Accad's novel L'Excisée, for it also explores the psychological torment suffered by the heroine. The Lebanese heroine comes from an orthodox Christian family who falls in love with a Muslim. Her suffering stems from a combination of factors, but most importantly from witnessing three young women undergo excision while she is living as a married, pregnant woman with her husband in a desert Muslim community. She is so powerfully affected by this scene, as well as by her husband's indifference to the act, that she escapes, accompanied by the younger sister of one of the excised girls, whom she intends to save from the practice. Although the heroine does not undergo excision herself, she is emotionally scarred by witnessing it, believing that it is an act of betrayal of women everywhere; finally, unable to cope with the prospect of her unborn child one day being submitted to the same ordeal, she commits suicide. Accad's treatment of excision in this novel exposes it as a practice forced upon women, who seem resigned to their fate, by the patriarchal society in which they live. Although it is the women who are concerned with the perpetuation of this tradition, it is a condition of their acceptance into their community, as one woman character explains to the protagonist in answer to her questioning as to why this "mutilation" should occur: "C'est la tradition. Les hommes ne l'épouserait pas. Elle ne serait pas
acceptée si elle n’était pas excisée. Il ne faut pas y penser’’ (p134) [It’s tradition. The men would not marry her if she was not excised. It’s completely out of the question]. In the next francophone novel to be discussed the protagonist likewise does not experience excision although her whole life, as well as those who are close to her, is governed by the practice.

An “Insider/Outsider” Discourse: Fatou Keïta’s Rebelle

Fatou Keïta’s Rebelle, told in the third person, recounts the growth from childhood to adulthood of its protagonist, Malimouna, who, exceptionally, has managed to “escape” being excised with her age group around puberty. Furthermore, she runs away from a forced marriage on her wedding night, when her husband discovers that she is not excised. After many adventures, she eventually finds herself in Paris where she dreams of helping her female compatriots who have migrated to France. After obtaining a Social Sciences degree, she finds work counselling such women, but is unable to help her young Malian friend who has her daughter excised illegally in France, resulting in the child’s death and the parents’ imprisonment. Moving to Africa, she again becomes involved in the process of helping and counselling African women, joining a group of women activists one of whose aims is to ban excision. The subject of excision is therefore a major theme in this novel and, as such, is a new phenomenon in African literature.

Unlike Tu t’appelleras Tanga and L’Excisée, Rebelle is not a psychological exploration of the subject of excision. In many ways it is a melodramatic tale involving blackmail, rape, a forced marriage, a husband’s infidelity, wife-beating and abduction culminating in a police rescue. To a certain extent, it has the same narrative shortcomings as Angèle Rawiri’s Fureurs et cris de femmes. Since the narration is full of exaggeration and coincidence, when a serious issue such as excision is broached, it is inserted into a set of barely credible circumstances. This is especially apparent during sequences when the heroine, Malimouna, wanders from family to family, and adventure to adventure, before finally settling down in Paris.
Moreover, one particular incident, when Malimouna blackmails the circumciser Dimikela, in order to avoid being excised herself, seems unlikely and contrived and takes precedence over some of the more serious aspects of Keïta’s handling of the subject of excision. As a young girl Malimouna is playing in the forest when, hearing strange noises, she climbs a tree and witnesses Dimikela having sexual intercourse with a young man from the village. In Malimouna’s stupefaction and confusion, she falls from the tree and loses consciousness. This event ultimately provides Malimouna with the ammunition to blackmail Dimikela, although the latter is very reluctant to let Malimouna avoid excision as she believes such a woman “ne peut être maîtresse de son corps et ne peut devenir qu’une dévergondée...” (p.21) [cannot be mistress of her body and must necessarily become a shameless woman...]. So Keïta underlines the standard reason for the carrying out of this procedure, notably that of controlling a woman’s sexuality. Dimikela’s statement implies not only that women are unable to control their own sexuality if they remain unexcised, but that a woman’s sexuality is dangerous and habitually out of control. The fact that excision has obviously not controlled Dimikela’s sexuality is encapsulated in Malimouna’s response to these words – that Dimikela is in fact describing the very nature of her own conduct which she has witnessed.

Is Malimouna’s rebellion against excision unusual? Keïta intimates that such instances do occur for her narrator comments that this ritual concerns girls who are becoming younger and younger so that they will be less likely to try and escape. Indeed, if it were not for Malimouna’s hold over Dimikela she would find it very difficult to avoid her fate as the entrance to Dimikela’s hut is guarded by two older women. The coercive nature of excision is apparent in both the francophone novels. As in Efuru, the young girls have access to the best food and are also feted when they return home. “Lorsqu’elles rentrèrent chez elles, elles eurent droit aux honneurs dus aux jeunes filles ayant subi leur première épreuve de femme” (p.28) [When they returned home, they had the right to the honours due to young girls having undergone their first ordeal as a woman].

In fact, rebellion against excision is not just limited to the African continent in this novel. Years later when Malimouna is working in Paris for an organisation which
helps immigrant women, she is visited by an old friend, Fanta, seeking her aid in convincing her daughter, Nouma, to agree to be excised. Malimouna confides in her friend that she has never been excised herself and asks her friend to reconsider. Fanta is scandalised at this news and pronounces her culture’s verdict that non-excision leads to immoral conduct. However, in Fanta’s plea for help it is easy to discern the pressure exerted by her husband who threatens to leave her if his daughter’s excision is not carried out:

*Mon mari me tuera si ce n’est pas fait demain! Tu comprends, elle s’était déjà sauvée la première fois que cela devait avoir lieu, et avait disparu pendant deux jours. Mon mari menace de me répudier avec elle... Il m’accuse de lui avoir monté la tête. Ou vais-je aller, que vais-je devenir?* (p.123)

[My husband will kill me if it isn’t done tomorrow! All the more so because she ran away the first time that it was supposed to happen and disappeared for two days. My husband threatens to reject me as well as her... He accuses me of having put these ideas into her head. Where will I go, what’s going to become of me?]

Noura’s excision results in her death and the imprisonment of her parents, as well as that of their compatriot, an elderly woman who performed the operation. The young girl, an unwilling participant, had struggled during the procedure resulting in her injury and death. The event is then sensationalised in the press and Malimouna questions whether punishment by imprisonment is justifiable in such a situation. Surely Fanta had been sufficiently punished by losing her daughter and by having her young children left parentless. This incident causes a dispute between Malimouna and her lover, Philippe, the director of the Institute where Malimouna had studied for her degree. He totally supports the verdict of the court, labelling the whole incident as “barbarous.” Malimouna resents both what she considers the judgemental attitude of an outsider regarding a complex situation and the press’s attempts to label them as “monstres sanguinaires, des sauvages incapables d’aimer leurs enfants” (p.127) [bloodthirsty monsters, savages incapable of loving their children].

Philippe’s reaction to the affair causes Malimouna to recall having seen a film on the subject by an African-American, a writer of world renown, which had also suggested that parents who subject their children to this, could not love them. Despite the fact that Malimouna herself thinks of the practice in terms of its “inutilité” (p.128) [needlessness] and its “caractère néfaste” (p.128) [harmful nature], she is not ready to
hear outside criticism. In this way the novel utilises what may be termed an “insider/outsider” discourse. In Malimouna’s words:

ce discours creux et superficiel était celui qu’elle avait elle-même tant de fois entendu de la bouche d’Occidentaux Ces gens qui voient souvent tout de l’extérieur et qui pourtant se croient autorisés à lancer au monde entier des condamnations steriles et injustes. (p.124-25)

[this hollow and superficial speech was one that she had herself heard so many times in the mouths of Westerners. Those people who so often see everything from the outside and who however believe themselves authorised to speak out to the whole world sterile and unjust condemnations].

Malimouna, an African, is an “insider” who is totally against the act of excision. However, she feels the outsider’s view of the practice, also anti-excision, such as that of her French lover, Philippe, is too simplistic. It is significant that the argument between these two with regard to Noura’s death as a result of her excision, is never resolved. Is Keïta perhaps suggesting an impasse between the “insider/outsider” view of this practice? According to the Egyptian writer already discussed, El Saadawi, some Western women have a tendency to draw sharp distinctions between their own situation and women in other countries:

They tend to depict our life as a continual submission to medieval systems, and point vehemently to some of the rituals and traditional practices such as female circumcision... Of course, it is good that female circumcision be denounced. But by concentrating on such manifestations there is a risk that the real issues of social and economic change be evaded or even forgotten, and that effective action be replaced by a feeling of superior humanity, a glow of satisfaction that may blind the mind and feelings to the concrete everyday struggle for women’s emancipation.86

Although El Saadawi is vehemently against excision, she does not agree with those women in America and Europe who concentrate on such issues simply to depict them as proof of the unusual and “barbaric” oppression to which women are exposed in African or Arabic countries. On the other hand, Beyala, in her Lettre d’une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales, argues against the complacency of other Western women who believe that if African women themselves do not rebel against their situation, it is because they are happy with the status quo. Beyala considers this a mistake: “Sometimes African women do not rebel against their oppression because it is so endemic in their societies, that it becomes “normal.”87 Beyala’s contention is also supported by Benoîte Groult, in her preface to Awa Thiam’s Black Sisters Speak Out, when she comments upon the dangers of being too reserved when commenting on
other cultures. In the matter of excision she believes that “anthropologists and journalists have always been extremely discreet about this mutilation which they describe as an ‘initiation ceremony’ or a ‘picturesque custom’” but Groult attributes such lack of criticism to the fact that “these tortures are only inflicted on little girls incapable of protesting.” She believes that all women, not only African women, should involve themselves in the struggle against excision and show their solidarity. These two very divergent views in relation to the “insider/outsider” dichotomy, underline the very real difficulty for any critic in discussing this subject.

The issue raised by Keïta’s novel of the legalities involving excision when practised illegally or without a child’s consent is also a controversial one. As there are an increasing number of African migrants to countries where excision is not practised and where it is, moreover, often illegal, host countries are presented with a dilemma. Should the social and health services and law-enforcing agencies act to protect girls from being excised? It is becoming an increasingly political issue and one which is affecting immigration policies to the extent that asylum may be granted to migrants who fear being excised if forced to return home to their own countries. Keïta does not offer any solutions but questions the type of legal action which is appropriate. In France, the Women’s Group for the Abolition of Sexual Mutilations organised by African women, reported that in 1992 there were 27,000 immigrant women and girls in France who had already undergone excision or were at risk of it. The problem is compounded when one considers that even where excision has been banned in Africa and the Middle East, this has not reduced the number of girls subjected to the procedure. As we saw in relation to the Kenyan novels studied, the anti-excision legislation passed by colonial governments was ineffective and present-day legislation is no less so. This has prevented many governments from introducing or enforcing legislation as they fear rebellion. However, Senegal, Egypt, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Kenya have introduced legislation. Senegal’s penal code makes it a crime to carry out or encourage excision, but there is wide opposition to the legislation and it is not actively enforced. Critics of the law said it was introduced to “please American sensitivities,” and to express their defiance, traditional leaders immediately prior to its introduction, circumcised 120 girls en masse in a Southern village. Senegal’s experience illustrates that for legislation to be successful, a change in society’s values
must occur first. It has been argued that comprehensive education campaigns will yield the best results and this is course of action is advocated by Keïta.96

To underline the importance of education in resolving this issue, when Malimouna returns to Africa she works as the President of AAFD, an organisation seeking to improve the situation of African women, one of its first aims a literacy program for women. It also campaigns against violence perpetrated upon women generally, including excision and forced marriage. When Malimouna wishes to speak on these subjects at a public meeting her husband is outraged, not wishing it to be known that he has married an unexcised woman, and he forbids his wife to speak: “Tu veux que je sois la risée de tous?”(p.199) [Do you want me to be the laughing stock of everybody?], repeating the phrase used by her mother many years before when faced with her daughter’s rebellion against excision. Unlike her mother, however, her husband is a well-educated man and yet society’s scorn and condemnation is feared equally by both and, despite the many years which have elapsed, little has changed in her society’s attitude towards excision.

The meeting goes ahead, as does Malimouna’s speech, and is a resounding success. According to the narrator women are finally beginning to realise that:

Leur éducation et leur culture avaient fait comprendre à ces femmes qu’elles étaient des êtres fragiles, très facilement corruptibles, et qu’elles avaient donc besoin d’être contrôlées et maîtrisées. Il fallait, pour ce faire, leur retirer cet organe singulièrement érogène qui, autrement, ne pouvait que les entraîner à la luxure et à la débauche. (p.218-19)

[Their education and culture had inculcated into women that they were fragile and very easily corruptible human beings, and that they therefore needed to be controlled and mastered. In order for this to happen their singularly erogenous organ had to be removed, otherwise it could only lead them into a life of lust and debauchery].

Furthermore, it is suggested that African men are more likely to lose control, one of the arguments in favour of polygamy being the difficulty of sexual abstinence for the husband whose wife is recovering from childbirth. Solidarity develops from the meeting, also an awareness by the women that they themselves have contributed to their own oppression by sending their sons to school to be educated, but not their daughters, and by encouraging their sons to pursue careers but their daughters to
The example of Malimouna who aspires to leadership in society, by helping her African sisters as a result of extensive studies, epitomises the author’s view of the importance of education. It is suggested that the only way for women’s attitude to change with regard to practices which affect them directly such as excision, is through education, a point to emerge in Likimani’s *They Shall Be Chastized*, as well as in Ngugi’s novel.97

How much credence can be given to Keïta’s fictionalised account in view of her tendency to melodrama? It is significant that in the public meeting organised against excision the individual women who testify to their own experiences reflect similar cases cited in non-fictional works, such as Awa Thiam’s *Black Sisters Speak Out*. In this work, as its title suggests, Thiam’s contention is that: “Black women have been silent for too long [...] Is it not high time that they discovered their own voices [...] if only to say that they exist, that they are human beings [...] and that, as such, they have a right to liberty, respect and dignity?”98 Thiam has interviewed women from the French-speaking countries of the Ivory Coast, Guinea, Mali and Senegal and the English-speaking countries of Nigeria and Ghana. These women tell of their lives, some of them recounting their excision experiences. One is a 35-year-old, university-educated woman, who has been excised and infibulated but does not wish the same thing to happen to her daughters who were all born in France. However, on returning to Mali, unbeknown to her and her husband, this operation is carried out under her mother’s orders. Thiam’s conclusion with regard to the women questioned about their excision is that the reasoning behind the practice was that “a woman must be made solely into an instrument of reproduction. Any enjoyment on her part constitutes a potential danger to the man, or at least he is led to believe this... It enables... [him] to have as many docile, submissive women under his thumb as he wants.”99 Moreover, quite apart from these oral testimonies collected by Thiam, Keïta’s novel contains many similarities to Waris Dirie’s recently published autobiography *Desert Flower*. As in the case of the protagonist in Keïta’s novel, Dirie runs away from her family in her teens to avoid being forced to marry a 60-year-old man. What follows is a tale of endurance and coincidence every bit as dramatic as Malimouna’s tale, underlining the credibility of the events depicted in *Rebelle*.100
Conclusion

Nwapa’s treatment of excision has been little commented on and Likimani’s novel has received scant critical attention. Both writers in their respective novels would seem to endorse the practice of excision. However, a close reading of *Efuru* does suggest a qualified criticism of this practice, with Nwapa herself admitting to a change of heart at a later period, although there are no further references to excision in her novels. Likimani seems to be highly critical of the ignorant attitudes towards this practice held by the colonialists although also admitting that the influence of the colonial educational system was insurmountable.

Both Kenyan authors, Likimani and Ngugi, focus on the stance taken against excision by the colonial authorities, and stress the cultural and sociological importance of excision in the Gikuyu community at the time. Thomas comments that the significance of excision continued well into the 1950s as a political point-scoring issue with the colonising authorities. However, her contention that the young girls’ insistence on performing excision on one another situates them as “central actors” rather than as “victims” is in reality not quite so clear cut. As she herself acknowledges, older women also attempted to reestablish control over this practice. The young girls’ actions, although showing agency, need to be read perhaps in terms of their own desire to conform to traditional practices that they felt themselves excluded from, and consequently can be construed as a reassertion of the status quo rather than an overturning of it. Ironically, it is left to the male author, Ngugi, to attempt to give an insight into the feelings of his female characters about excision. Yet this view is conditioned by the author’s tendency to consider his female characters in terms of their symbolic value, rather than as actors and instigators in, and of, their own particular histories.
The life stories by Aman and Dirie are striking in the depth of personal experience and detailed knowledge presented. The two women take an overtly opposed stance as to the necessity of excision, but although Aman is willing to rebel against other practices in her society, such as marital subordination, she nevertheless does not question excision. In both autobiographies the mother/daughter relationship plays an important role. As in Keita’s *Rebelle*, no blame is attributed to the mother, unlike Beyala’s *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*. Indeed, Waris Dirie recently confirmed her position, saying that her mother had no choice, that it had been done from mother to daughter for generations and that her father, who wanted her to be able to marry, was also a victim “*de coutumes ancestrales barbares*”\(^{103}\) [of barbarous ancestral customs].

Beyala’s *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* is quite overt in its difference from the other novels. It is the only one to point to the exploitative attitude of a mother who thinks only in terms of her daughter’s “*bottom power*.”\(^{104}\) Since Beyala focuses on a community living in extreme squalor and poverty, it may be thought that Tanga’s earnings are a necessity for her family’s survival. However, Beyala’s first novel, *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulée*, likewise set in urban squalor, sets a high store on the protagonist’s virginity, as do other novels studied. Beyala subverts the proclaimed purpose of excision, “becoming a woman” with all that it generally entails in traditional societies: the respect of elders, the significance of “age groups,” as well as readiness for marriage and procreation, when she underlines the intentions of Tanga’s mother. Tanga, in becoming a woman, must prostitute herself and accordingly receives no respect; she is too “soiled” for marriage and the cruelty she has been exposed to results in her rejection of motherhood.\(^{105}\) Beyala’s aim appears to be to depict excision as nothing more than an act of cruelty and exploitation. Although in many of the other novels studied mothers play a dominant role in the excision of their daughters, indifference to their daughters’ suffering is not a feature of them, with the exception already noted in El Saadawi’s autobiographical account.\(^{106}\)

In *Rebelle*, despite the tendency towards melodrama, and the use of “stock characters” such as the wicked husband who undergoes a remarkable sudden change of character,\(^{107}\) Keïta nevertheless gives a new direction and focus to this issue. This is apparent in the successful agency of her protagonist, as well as in her stress that
excision is not just of "local" interest, but concerns African communities living abroad: the author discusses attitudes of the French legal system, as well as of health and social workers. Her work is thus significant in relation to the issue of cultural relativism. According to a report by the Australian Council: "Those who defend the right of parents to have their daughters "circumcised" sometimes refer to their traditional values and their right to cultural integrity without interference from persons who hold different cultural values." However, the report determines that "there is a distinction to be drawn between neo-colonialist attempts to impose western human rights standards on Third World countries and cultural practices [...] through which women are valued less than men." Other critical works give cogency to many of the issues explored in Keïta's novel and therefore it is her approach to her subject matter, rather than its plausibility, which at times undermines her argument.

Considering the time frame covered by the publication of these novels, thirty-two years, from 1966 to 1998, their similarities in treating the subject of excision are more striking than their differences. One such similarity is the danger of excision and infibulation to a woman's health, to the extent that it is life-threatening. This danger, and also the pain involved, is evoked by all the authors, from textual hints in the earlier novels, Efuru and They Shall Be Chastized to more explicit references in The River Between, Rebelle, Aman and Desert Flower. Beyala in Tu t'appelleras Tanga does not discuss this aspect of excision, although she does underline the resultant psychological torment. Even Aman in her autobiography makes a plea for future generations of young girls to be spared the pain involved: "These days in my country, they're doing it in the hospital so there is no pain. I hope more women will do it that way for their daughters"(p.281). However, some commentators voice misgivings at such a situation, fearing it will lead to a normalising and acceptance of the practice. Dirie's autobiography underlines the hazards involved, not surprisingly, as the risks are greater from infibulation. She tells of the deaths of a sister who haemorrhages and a cousin whose wound becomes gangrenous. Even though Dirie leaves the reader in no doubt as to the immense pain she suffers, she considers herself fortunate since she at least survives. She notes how, when she travelled around with her family, they would meet the same families, year after year, but sometimes the daughter would be missing: "No one spoke the truth about their
absence, or even spoke of them at all" (p.49). According to Dirie, it is precisely because women are so strong physically that it is deemed necessary to weaken them. She cites the example of her own mother who gave birth to 12 children, setting out into the desert alone, with a knife to cut the umbilical cord, and who would return a few days later carrying her newborn child. "C'est justement parce que les femmes sont si résistantes que les hommes ont besoin d'exercer leur domination avec une telle violence. L'excision affaiblit, physiquement et socialement." [It's precisely because women are so robust that men need to exercise their domination in such a violent manner. Excision weakens, both physically and socially].

Another similarity in many of the works discussed is the protagonists' wish to conform to the accepted practices of their community. However, the difference of approach by these authors lies in whether or not they themselves endorse compliance with tradition. The earliest reference to excision concerns Efuru who does not question her fate, and whose author at this period believed the matter to be inconsequential. The next novel examined, *They Shall Be Chastized*, presents the differing beliefs of the various parties on excision, but excludes the point of view of the actual participants. The narrator suggests that practices such as excision are inevitably, perhaps unfortunately, subject to change due to the colonial incursion. Ngugi's *The River Between* highlights the political controversy over excision, but there is some ambivalence in the narrator's attitude. However the need to conform to traditional social practices, to belong to one's own "age-group," seems to be a powerful motive in all the anglophone novels. When excision is rejected by an individual, as in the case of Nyambura in Ngugi's novel, it is in accordance with an indigenous patriarchal structure armed with a new ideology, with its own set of values and adherences, that of the colonising religion, Christianity, another patriarchal institution. In Aman's oral history, there is no question that the speaker accepts the practice unquestioningly as part of her culture and, moreover, is quite outspoken against what she terms outside interference.

Other works describe protagonists who do not wish to conform. Dirie's autobiography is a fervent plea for the abandonment of excision and she herself has become part of the political and emotional debate by attempting, as she puts it, with
regard to her compatriots, to try to “reach their hearts with my words.”¹¹³ In the francophone novels, Beyala questions the motives behind excision and, presumably therefore, the practice itself, especially as the reader is aware of her feelings expressed in her *Lettre d’une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales*.¹¹⁴ In the very recent novel, *Rebelle*, there is an overt questioning of the practice to the point where the protagonist rebels. Excision is treated by the narrator as just one of the many oppressive measures African women have to bear. Indeed, with the passage of time, marked by the publication of these works, it is possible to note a progressively firmer stance against the practice of excision, with the exception of Aman, who, at the time of telling her story, voices no criticism at all.

This aspect of conformity or non-conformity is also related to the “insider/outsider” debate. This debate is a major point of uniformity in all of the works considered except for two novels: *Efuru*, which in this respect is set entirely in a traditional context, and *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* which is also unique in its evocation of post-independence urban squalor. In the two Kenyan novels the outsider discourse is part of a colonising apparatus, represented by the missionaries, especially apparent in *They Shall Be Chastized*. Their attitude is reflected in their choice of language to describe excision, with terms such as “barbarous”, “pagan” and “heathen” implying a lack of civilisation in the peoples they have conquered in line with their exclusively Western values and the scientific and cultural imperialistic discourse in operation at that time. In *Rebelle* the insider/outsider dichotomy consists of a description of the attitude of the French who also regard excision as barbaric, as compared to the protagonist, Malimouna and many of her compatriots. In *Aman* and *Desert Flower* the outsider discourse is partly present in the collaborative writing process, particularly in the foreword and afterword of the former work.¹¹⁵ In *Desert Flower* insider discourse is highlighted as the Somali emigrants come into contact with French values. One such example is Dirie’s aunt who does not wish to discuss her culture’s practices, as seen in her attitude towards Western doctors: “l’excision est une de nos coutumes africaines, il n’était pas question d’en parler avec ces hommes blancs”(p.215) [excision is one of our African customs; there was no question of talking about it with these white men]. Another example is the Somali interpreter at the hospital who rejects a French surgeon’s attempts at intervention. Indeed, it is only when the
protagonists of *Rebelle*, *Aman* and *Desert Flower* come into contact with other cultures that they realise that they are different from other women, whether African or Western. It is therefore all the more surprising that some African writers employ the same sort of derogatory terminology already referred to in relation to excision. An example of this is Beyala’s comment that respecting differing cultural values should not be an excuse for not criticising evil practices: “*respecter les différences culturelles ne signifie pas accepter n’importe quelles insanités, n’importe quelle barbarité dont certaines sociétés — notamment la société africaine — nous abreuvent*”(p.99) [respecting cultural differences does not mean that one should accept any insanities, any barbarous behaviour which certain societies — notably African society — heaps upon us]. Such derogatory terminology is also evident in Dirie’s comment on a time when she hopes the mutilation of women will be abolished: “*Ce jour-là, on aura compris que la fidélité des femmes ne se gagne pas par des rituels barbares. Mais par la confiance et l’amour.*”116 [Only then will people have understood that women’s fidelity is not to be earned by barbaric rituals, but with trust and love]. The employment of such vocabulary by African women not only underlines the strength of sentiment such an issue provokes, but may also suggest other patterns of domination in which African women are implicated, where issues of gender, rather than race, are paramount.

Finally, it is pertinent to question whether the works forming part of this literary focus provide any insight into the debate concerning the motivating force behind the various African cultures’ approach to the issue of excision? Many writers on this subject seem to agree with Dirie that the purpose of excision, and more especially infibulation, is to control women’s sexuality.117 Beyala cites examples of men’s desire to monopolise women’s bodies, and asks whether their obsession with interfering in women’s choice about procreation is not something which “*ils ont toujours recherché depuis la nuit des temps, à savoir le contrôle de notre corps?*”118 [which they have sought since the beginning of time, namely the control of our body?] She considers that excision and infibulation are another example of this for, when they are carried out, “*les hommes s’octroient le droit de contrôler notre corps*”119 [men grant themselves the right to control our body]. El Saadawi has also given the desire to control a woman’s sexuality as the reasoning behind the practice of excision. She
has stated that “female circumcision is meant to preserve the chastity of young girls by reducing their desire for sexual intercourse.” She believes that at a very early stage it was realised that:

sexual desire in the female is very powerful, and that women, unless controlled and subjugated by all sorts of measures, will not submit themselves to the moral, social, legal and religious constraints with which they have been surrounded, and in particular the constraints related to monogamy.¹²⁰

For El Saadawi the practice of polygamy would never have been possible, or remained so, if it were not for “the whole range of cruel and ingenious devices that were used to keep [a woman’s] sexuality in check and limit her sexual relations to only one man, who had to be her husband.”¹²¹ This statement corroborates Beauvoir’s contention that monogamous relations by women were necessary in connection with succession and inheritance, the upholding of the patriarchal family and the preservation of economic interests.¹²² The same reasoning is equally applicable to the situation discussed in these novels, where excision becomes a point of economic as well as personal significance.¹²³

Superficially, at least, it would seem that it is women who instigate and control the procedure but, nevertheless, it is often men who insist upon it as I noted in The River Between, Rebelle and Desert Flower. Lightfoot-Klein’s study, which focuses primarily on Sudan, alludes to the position of men on this issue and, although she admits that this is a complex matter, she asserts that generally speaking, “among the uneducated and tradition-minded which comprise almost the entire bulk of the population [of Sudan] the rule of custom is accepted and upheld without any question whatsoever”¹²⁴ and that “women who were clitoridectomized or circumcised in a modified fashion were pharaonically circumcised on the husband’s demand after marriage.”¹²⁵

Nevertheless it cannot be denied that, whether for political and ideological reasons, as in The River Between, or through a desire to comply with one’s own cultural practices, or being indoctrinated into doing so, as in Aman, women are adamant in their acceptance of excision. However, such an acceptance is voiced without a full knowledge of the facts and repercussions of excision, as is only to be expected when it
is perpetrated on children, as in Desert Flower and Aman. Perhaps it is not so remarkable that, once excised, many women want to continue the tradition, especially as one of its main purposes appears to be to render women subservient, as in They Shall Be Chastized. Moreover, many such women have internalised this subservience, the example being given by Thiam of a 26-year old Malian graduate, divorced, with one child, who refused to view her excision as a “mutilation,” believing it to be desirable because it permitted a woman to be mistress of her body: “I’ve been divorced for four years and I’ve never for one moment felt the desire to run after a man, or felt the absence of sexual relations to be a lack, a vital lack.”

In the various excision ceremonies discussed, the absence of men has been frequently mentioned, and one might infer that their influence is minimal. However, this is not upheld in any of the examples studied or in any of the critical material available. The absence of men from the excision ceremony has been the cause of criticism by some commentators. According to Daly, excision corresponds to an “erasure of male responsibility...by virtue of male absence at the execution of the mutilation.” The women writers themselves are almost uniform in stating that it is a question of men wishing to control women’s behaviour, rendering them more subservient and ensuring purity upon marriage and their fidelity thereafter. However, bearing in mind the myriad of complexities raised, the answer is in reality not so simple. We have seen how women, especially mothers, have played a significant role in the perpetuation of excision. One fact that emerges, however, in the few studies conducted on the reasons behind excision in African communities, is the “patriarchal underpinnings of the practice and the ways in which women come to accept their secondary status. A constant point to emerge was the inferiority of women – a fact that women and men both seem to accept.” It seems that for women, risks to health and damage to sexuality are overtaken by fear of losing the psychological, moral and material benefits of properly belonging to society. With marriage comes the material support provided by men without which women in many African countries would be unable to survive. El Saadawi believes that excision “is not related to Islam; it is not related to Africa; it is not related to any colour or religion. It is related to a patriarchal class system of 5,000 years ago when men started to build a patriarchal family, a patriarchal
society." A consideration of the nature of patriarchy underlies my final chapter of this thesis, as it is seen in the father/daughter relationship.


Mary Daly has also referred to excision as “unspeakable – incapable of being expressed in words because inexpressibly horrible,” in chapter 5 entitled “African Genital Mutilation: The Unspeakable Atrocities” in *Gyn/Ecology*, pp.153-77, p.154. In a slightly more moderated stance Daly also believes they are unspeakable in a second sense, that is, “there are strong taboos against saying/writing the truth about them,” p.155. It could be posited that Daly’s tone in the first citation provides supporters of this practice with fuel for criticism against culturally insensitive Westerners.


6 Kesteloot however is incorrect to cite Flora Nwapa and Ahmadou Kourouma as examples. In Nwapa’s first novel, *Efuru*, the eponymously named heroine does undergo excision. Kesteloot cites Kourouma as having written “pas un seul mot” [not one word], p.40, on this subject, but his novel, *Les Soleils des indépendances*, also cited by Lee, contains a long description of a ceremony in which the protagonist, Salimata, is excised. In a later article Kesteloot reiterates that African writers “n’avaient jamais abordé” [had never taken up] the subject of excision “en trente ans de prose consacrée à l’Afrique” [in thirty years of prose dedicated to Africa], *Environnement africain: cahiers d’étude du milieu et d’aménagement du territoire* No. 39-40, Vol. X., 3-4, Enda, Dakar: Tiers-monde, 1997, pp.31-44, p.33. She then however contradicts herself by referring to Aminata Maïga Ka’s “le Miroir de la vie” (1988) as “le seul écho féminin” “dans son aspect le plus élémentaire” [the only female echo...in its most elementary aspect] and “Somalia’s Nourredine [sic] Farah’s novel, *Sardines* (1981).


8 Ibid., p.41.


11 For a more detailed description of these procedures see, for example, Toubia’s *Female Genital Mutilation*, p.10; Hanny Lightfoot-Klein’s *Prisoners of Ritual: An Odyssey into Female Genital Circumcision in Africa* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1989), p.33.

12 Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation*, pp.13-14


15 For details of sexual and psychological effects of excision, see Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation*, pp.17-18.

16 Ibid., p.5.

17 Ibid., p.9.

18 Ibid., p.21.


20 Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation*, p.12. According to Coquery-Vidrovitch excision “may have been practiced on girls of the aristocracy during the first millennium B.C, but analysis of mummies has not been conclusive. The first account known, beyond rare ones on papyrus, is that of Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C. which attributes excision to the Phoenicians, Hittites, Ethiopians, and Egyptians.” *African Women: A Modern History*, p.207.


22 According to Toubia and other commentators, excision preceded Islam in Africa. “When Islam entered Africa, it is most likely that newly converted leaders, seeking to continue the practice of [excision], linked it with Islam. Over time, a belief was created in the minds of Muslims in these countries that [excision] was required by Islam,” *Female Genital Mutilation*, p.31. According to
Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual*, the practice is unknown in 80% of the Arabic world, notably in Saudi Arabia and Iran, and in Egypt it is mainly confined to the Nile valley, p.41.

23 The Kenyan writer, Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* (1966; Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1974) was published the same year.


27 Beyala insists that her letter is not just a cry of alarm but one which seeks help from Western women whom she asks to “occupez-vous des conditions de vie des femmes d’autres continents!” [Attend to the conditions of the lives of women from other continents!] Beyala, *Lettre d’une Africaine a ses sceurs occidentales* (Paris: Spengler, 1995), pp.103-04.

28 Ibid., pp.105-07.


30 Gay Wilentz, *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora* (Blooming and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), p.5. Wilentz cites this passage as an example of the orality inherent in Nwapa’s text where women uphold a tradition which may be harmful to them. She believes that “language itself covers up the action and, thus the orature does not necessarily protect the women but reinforces a practice basically antibithetical to women’s health and desires,” p.7.

31 The financial gain of the circumciser is one of the reasons for the perpetuation of excision. According to Toubia, in Sudan and Gambia traditional practitioners “who come from poor families and/or ethnic groups with low social status. The income from FGM is many times what they could earn as a mere nurse or midwife.” *Female Genital Mutilation*, p.29. See also Lightfoot-Klein, *Prisoners of Ritual*, p.77.

32 Stratton also makes this point stating that Efuru’s refusal foreshadows “her ultimate revolt against her confinement in sexual roles,” *Contemporary African Literature*, p.94.


34 Ibid., p.208.


37 The social and political significance of “age groups” underlies the importance given to circumcision in the work of early nationalists such as Jomo Kenyatta. See, for example, *Facing Mount Kenya* (London: Seeker and Warburg, 1968), pp.130-54. As an “athomi” (reader or Christian educated Gikuyu) Kenyatta breaks with the missionaries on this issue, along with other nationalists. For Kenyatta circumcision is a crucial feature of Gikuyu life because of its implications for social groupings and cohesion.

38 For a full account both of the excision ceremony itself and its importance to Gikuyu culture, see the chapter entitled “Initiation of Boys and Girls” in Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya*. Additionally, Kenyatta discusses the difference in standing between the circumcised and uncircumcised youth, pp.107-08.
It is interesting to note that Ngugi appears to wish to both defend indigenous cultures and to assert female value, a clash which is far from atypical of early "progressive" nationalists in Africa. See Joseph J. Walters' Guanya Pau: A Story of an African Princess (Cleveland, Ohio: Lauer and Mattill, 1891; reissued Nebraska, 1994), which both defends and attacks polygamy. For more details of this text, see Gareth Griffiths, African Literatures in English: East and West (Harlow, Longman, 2000), pp.63-66. A fully annotated scholarly edition of this early text is currently in preparation, eds. Gareth Griffiths and J.V. Singler. See also the work of Samuel Crowther, the first African Anglican bishop, on "polygamy" in the 1860s and 70s. The latter had a long correspondence with Venn, Secretary of the Church Missionary Society of the 1850s as to whether polygamous people were to be allowed into the Church or not. Crowther did not want to exclude them but they were forced out of the church, although ironically they continued to own slaves, another point of contention with the Church. For a biography and important works of Crowther, see Griffiths, African Literatures in English, p.369.

The notion of an act of betrayal of women as former rulers is also present in the myth contained in Beyala's C'est le soleil qui m'a brûlée (Paris: Stock, 1987). See pp.134-35 of chapter 2 for a discussion of this myth.

Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, pp.3-8.

41 Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya, p.18.

42 Ibid., p.6 (Emphasis added). Of note also in this tribal legend is the fact that the women, deprived of power while hindered by their pregnancies, nevertheless still managed to negotiate a concession, that they would be allowed to maintain the original names of the clan established during the matriarchal era, but only by threatening not to bear any more children and to kill all the male children born as a result of the revolt, pp.7-8. Also significant is not only woman's ability to negotiate under duress but also the importance allotted to the continuance of the male line.

43 Ibid., p.7.

44 In this respect she mirrors the behaviour of Mireille’s mother in Mariama Bâ’s Un chant écarlate (1981) where the husband likewise rejects his daughter because she has married a Senegalese, in what he believes is a betrayal of their cultural beliefs.

45 Lightfoot-Klein, in Prisoners of Ritual, referring to the situation in Kenya, comments that “where clitoridectomy is practiced among tribes that have been converted to Christianity, the custom has [...] assumed religious significance,” p.42. She appears to be writing about the situation current at the time of her work (1989), so the efforts of Missionaries and their early converts described in The River Between have had little long-term impact.


48 A few such examples can be seen in Mariama Bâ’s early novel Une si longue lettre (1980) in the role played by Tante Nabou; Buchi Emecheta’s The Slave Girl (1977) by Ma Palagada and The Joys of Motherhood (1979) by the protagonist herself, Nnu Ego, and explicitly in the following quotation from Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions, in the role played by Tete Gladys: “One evening [...] Bahamukuru summoned a kind of family dare which consisted of the patriarchy – the three brothers, who were Bahamukuru, my father and Babamununi Thomas, and their sister – and the male accused,” p.136. (Emphasis added).

49 Thomas, “Ngaitana,” p.28. This information was gleaned in an interview with Charity Tirindi by Thomas on 2 October 1995, the former a member of one of the Ngaitana age-groups who circumcised themselves.


52 Thomas, “Ngaitana,” p.18.

53 Ibid., p.19.

54 Ibid., p.25.

55 As Levin, “Women as Scapegoats,” remarks, “the Christian campaign for abolition of excision, concerned neither with female health nor with women’s integrity, but rather with sexuality as sin, was seriously misguided,” pp.214-15.

56 Ibid., p.216. Moreover, Kenyatta’s attitude to the physical procedure of excision also reflects Waiyaki’s when the former comments that: “The real anthropological study, therefore, is to show that clitoridectomy, like Jewish circumcision, is a mere bodily mutilation, which, however, is regarded as the sine qua non of the whole teaching of tribal law, religion, and morality,” Facing Mount Kenya, p.133. (Emphasis added).

58 In fact, the association of excision with water is also a factor in Ngugi’s The River Between where all the initiates, both male and female, bathe in the waters of the local river before their circumcision, the cold water supposedly having a numbing effect.

59 However, in Accad’s L’Excisée, discussed on p.190 of this chapter, religious rituals also accompany the excision ceremony.

60 Beyala, Lettre d’une Africaine, p.88.

61 Aman’s feelings in this regard are very similar to El Saadawi’s protagonist, Firdaus, in Woman at Point Zero (1975; London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1983), trans. Sherif Hetata, when she remarks, referring to the sexual pleasure caused by her uncle’s attentions: “It was as if I could no longer recall the exact spot from which it [sexual pleasure] used to arise, or as though a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return,” p.15. According to Levin, El Saadawi uses excision in this novel “as a leit-motif of loss.” “Women as Scapegoats,” p.208. Françoise Lionnet has also referred to references to excision in this novel as “the insistent questioning of the body, of its sensations of pleasure and pain,” which she believes is in “sharp contrast,” to El Saadawi’s graphic autobiographical account contained in The Hidden Face of Eve. See Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p.147. Excerpts from El Saadawi’s autobiographical account are cited by Lionnet, pp.139-40, by Levin, pp.205-06, and by myself (this page).

62 Family Law Council, Female Genital Mutilation: A Report to the A-G, pp.19-21, details the long-term effects of infibulation, such as infertility and high infant mortality. Difficulties in childbirth for infibulated women occur quite frequently and can be serious due to scarring and hardened tissue blocking the passage at birth, p.17.


65 Fishburn, Reading Buchi Emecheta, p.147.

66 Elleke Boehmer also refers this phenomenon as the postcolonial text’s “possibly untranslatable cultural specificity,” Colonial and Postcolonial Literature, p.245. Unlike Fishburn, however, Boehmer comments that a society is not “necessarily enclosed within its own scaffolding of values and preconceptions” but that there is a “partial opacity” operating, Ibid. (Emphasis in original). This may require the postcolonial reader to “draw on specialized knowledge” and address “the particularity of different textual situations,” pp. 246, 248.


70 El Saadawi, The Hidden Face of Eve, pp.7-11.

71 Ibid., p.22.

72 However, it is interesting to note that in Beyala’s first novel, C’est le soleil qui m’a brulée, likewise set in urban squalor, virginity is considered to be important to the point that the protagonist, Ateba, must suffer the indignity of having her virginity verified in a ritual which is also a physical invasion of her body.

73 El Saadawi, The Hidden Face of Eve, pp.7-8.

74 Le Roman camerounais, p.233. Brière also remarks that the mothers which Beyala discusses in her works are not unlike the “mère dévorante” [devouring mother] of the oral tradition, citing “Morphologie du conte africain,” Cahiers des études africaines 45: XII, Cahier I, 1972: 131-63, as well as the mother who is jealous of her daughter’s sexuality to be found in European tales, as analysed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in a chapter entitled “The Queen’s Looking Glass,” The Madwoman in the Attic (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp.3-44.


76 Ibid., p.9.

77 Ibid.


79 See chapter 1 for comments on Rawiri’s technique.

80 Blackmail is also implicated in the Senegalese writer, Aminata Maiga Ka’s treatment of this subject in the novella, “La Voie du salut” in La Voie du salut suivi de Le Miroir de la vie (Paris and Dakar: Présence Africaine, 1985) where a physician, aware that a three-moth old baby’s death has been caused
as a result of her excision, blackmails her father, Sáido Hane and her uncle, Demba Diallo. The physician will keep silent on condition that he is able to marry Diallo’s daughter, Rokhaya.

This aspect of the excision ritual, with the young girls being treated to the best foods, is reminiscent of the practice, in some African cultures (for example, the Efik, Ibibio and Igbo ethnic groups of Southern Nigeria) of young women who were “fattened,” with nothing to do except eat and rest in order to render them more appealing to their prospective husbands. Noting that this practice is now obsolete, Pauline Ada Uwakweh points out how it was a rite de passage to womanhood [in this regard similar to the purpose of excision] and she contrasts the concept behind the traditional “fattening-room” practice with that of anorexia in “Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions,” Research in African Literatures 26.1 (1995): 75-84, p.81.

In Postcolonial Representations, p.156, Lionnet cites Geneviève Giudicelli-Delage, “Excision et droit pénal”, Droit et Cultures 20 (1990): (n. pag.), p.207, who points out that France is the only European country to prosecute those who practise or aid in performing excision. Lionnet cites a five-year jail term for a Malian woman, Aramata Keita and five years suspended sentence with two years’ probation for the parents, Sory and Sémité Coulibaly, who had their six daughters excised by Keita in 1982 and 1983.

Toubia has spoken about the tendency of the Western media to sensationalise excision which has led to African women being unwilling to speak out against this issue, Female Genital Mutilation, pp.5-6.


This is a reference to Alice Walker’s film Warrior Marks. Walker also treats the subject of excision in her novel Possessing the Secret of Joy (London: Vintage, 1992). Walker certainly treats the subject of excision here in a contentious manner, for the young protagonist, Tashi, returns to the Olinka community as an adult, to murder the old woman who had excised her many years before. Her treatment of excision in this novel has been criticised by critics and writers alike. See, for example, Stanlie M. James’ article, “Shades of Othering: Reflections on Female Circumcision/Genital Mutilation” in Signs 23.4 (1998): 1031-48, where he remarks that he finds the analogy drawn between Walker’s personal misfortune, that of an injury she received from being shot blind in one eye by her brother, and that of “female circumcision/genital mutilation which millions of women have experienced over thousands of years,” as being “particularly problematic,” p.1031. Moreover, he believes that it results in the “othering or marginalizing of the very people she wishes her audience to support,” p.1032. Emecheta has also commented in an interview on the fact that “female circumcision is no longer relevant culturally” in Africa. Moreover she personally does not “welcome her [Walker’s] intervention,” in “A Conversation with Dr. Buchi Emecheta” by Oladipo Joseph Ogundele on July 22, 1994, Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta, pp.446-57, p.455.


Beyala, Lette, p.102.


For example, the United States Board of Immigration Appeals, in a key policy ruling, June 13th, 1998, granted asylum to Fauziya Kasinga, 18, who said she feared being forced to undergo excision if she were sent back to Togo. Moreover, a Nigerian woman living illegally in Portland, Oregon, was spared deportation in 1994 to protect her two American-born daughters from forced operations. The Seattle Times July 11, 1996. Internet access Aug 12 1996. Contact <bdav-new@seattimes.com>

For a full discussion of the issues raised by the practice of excision by immigrants from Mali living in France, see chapter 7, “The Limits of Universalism: Identity, Sexuality, and Criminality” in Lionnet’s Postcolonial Representations, pp.154-66.

Toubia, Female Genital Mutilation, p.26.

Unlike Kenyatta, who favoured excision, President Daniel Moi, his successor, took a strong stand against these rites and in July 1982 threatened to prosecute anyone involved in them. “Moi’s position has not been implemented, however, and the Kenyan government has recognized the need for a slower approach, which utilizes ‘tact and prudence.’” Lightfoot-Klein, Prisoners of Ritual, p.44, citing L. Kouba and J. Muasher, “Female Circumcision in Africa: An Overview,” African Studies Review 28.1 (1985): 95-110, p.105.

94 Ibid., p.45. If it were, 1-2 million Senegalese would be imprisoned.

95 Ibid., p.45.

96 Toubia argues that in order for such campaigns to be effective and to enlist the support of African women, “eradication efforts must be empathic, not alienating.” She suggests a “global action which would unite local knowledge and sensibility with international technical and financial resources to create a multitude of programs.” *Female Genital Mutilation*, p.43.

97 One recent success story concerns an organisation entitled TOSTAN in Senegal. In 1995 female literacy countywide was just over half the rate for men (23% compared to 44%), and the discrepancy was still greater in rural areas. TOSTAN offers an 18-month learning programme that combines basic education in national languages with practical development issues. As a result of their training the newly literate women of Malicounda addressed the problem of excision and, after having listened to their arguments, the village council abolished the practice in 1997. Other communities have followed their lead. The article is based on research conducted by Senegalese researchers with the support and technical supervision of Peter Easton, Florida State University, and with the active collaboration of the concerned African communities. “Senegalese Women Remake Their Culture,” *IK Notes World Bank* (3 Dec. 1998). <H-AFRLITCTNE@H-NET.MSU.EDU> Access 5 Jan 1999.

98 Thiam, *Black Sisters Speak Out*, p.11.

99 Ibid., p.68.

100 The dramatic nature of such tales is underlined in what Neustatter referred to as a “romantic rags-to-riches story” in her article entitled “The Cruellest Cut,” p.12.

101 For example, see endnote no. 6 concerning Kesteloot’s inclusion of Flora Nwapa among those who have not having written anything on the subject of excision. Moreover, Sonia Lee, in her anthology *Romancieres du continent noir*, fails to cite Nwapa as an example, even though she includes the novel *Efuru* in her anthology. Perhaps these authors’ oversight is due to Nwapa’s naming of excision as a “bath.”


104 This term seems to be in current usage. It is certainly used by Emecheta, for example, in her novel *Double Yoke*, when the protagonist Nko uses the expression “It is easier to get a good degree using one’s brain power than bottom power,” p.155.

105 See the discussion of *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* in chapter 1, pp.48-50.

106 This novel of Beyala’s is not the only one by a francophone African woman writer to depict a mother’s exploitative attitude towards her daughter by encouraging her to prostitute herself. Angèle Rawiri’s first novel, *G’amèrakano, au carrefour* (1989) is another such example.

107 Keita is not alone in depicting male protagonists who undergo a sudden, unexplained change in their conduct towards their wives, usually because they have taken a mistress or another wife, often without their first wives’ knowledge. Just from examples in the novels studied in this thesis, we can note the behaviour of Ali in *Changes* and Joseph in *Fureurs et cris de femmes* (1989). Other examples are found in Mariama Ba’s two novels, *Une si longue lettre* (1980) in connection with both Ramatoulaye’s and Aissiatou’s husbands and *Un chant écarlate* (1981) when Ousmane marries Oumeylatou unbeknown to his wife, Mireille.


109 Doctors in Sudan have estimated that the number of fatalities due to infibulation is about one third of all girls in areas where antibiotics are not available. Family Law Council, *Female Genital Mutilation: Discussion Paper* (Barton, ACT, Australia: The Council, 1994), p.16.

110 Pain itself is also a danger due to the possibility of the body entering into a state of shock which could result in death. See Toubia, *Female Genital Mutilation*, p.14.

111 Ibid. According to Toubia, when clitoridectomy was promoted as a safer alternative to infibulation in Sudan it was rejected by women activists as a “regressive strategy,” p.16.


113 Neustatter, “The Cruellest Cut,” p.15. These words, once again, raise the issue of the ghost narrator and whether the impact of these words is lessened because of this. The wider issue of the autobiography versus the ghosted life story is beyond the scope of this thesis.

114 In fact, in her *Lettre d’une Africaine*, Beyala mentions an episode when she narrowly escapes being excised herself when staying with relatives in a village where excision is practised, unlike her own tribe which does not practise it, pp.84-87.
In her essay “French Feminism in an International Frame,” Yale French Studies 62 (1981): 154-84, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak tells of her encounter with a Sudanese woman sociologist who has written “a structural functionalist dissertation of female circumcision in the Sudan.” Spivak uses this encounter to question the sovereignty of Western theoretical discourses, particularly feminism, which are caught “in a web of information retrieval inspired at best by: ‘what can I do for them?'”(p.155). Spivak’s approach in this essay has been critiqued by Bart Moore-Gilbert in a chapter entitled “Gayatri Spivak: The Deconstructive Twist,” in Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics (London and New York: Verso, 1997), pp.74–113. He writes that whereas this essay “begins by disavowing any desire to patronize her young Sudanese colleague (not altogether convincingly, given the tone of her comment that ‘I was ready to forgive [her] sexist term ‘female circumcision’), Spivak is nonetheless speaking over the head of this ‘misguided’ Third World academic in the West and, indeed, using her as an object-lesson in the perils of ‘ideological victimage’. The patronage this implies is most marked in the conclusion, where, quite astonishingly, Spivak offers the essay as ‘a theme that can liberate my colleague from Sudan’.”(p.106) Spivak’s remark that in her Sudanese colleague’s research regarding clitoridectomy, Spivak finds “an allegory of [her] own ideological victimage” is reminiscent of Alice Walker’s comment cited by Stanlie James in endnote no. 85 of this chapter, in which she draws an analogy between her personal misfortune and excision. Both Walker’s and Spivak’s remarks seem insensitive in the circumstances.

One such example is Wombs and Alien Spirits by Janice Boddy, who, in connection with possible explanations for infibulation, writes: “those which refer to the preservation of chastity and the curbing of women’s sexual desire seem most persuasive [to Boddy] given that in Sudan, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, the dignity and honor of a family are vested in the conduct of its womenfolk,”p.53.


In a chapter entitled “Early Tillers of the Soil,” Beauvoir contends that men “wants the work of the family, which he uses to improve his fields, to be totally his, and this means that the workers must belong to him: so he enslaves his wife and children. He needs heirs, in whom his earthly life will be prolonged because he hands down his property to them, and who will perform for him after his death the rites and observances needed for the repose of his soul,” Ibid.

According to Boddy “The critical importance of women to Somali interlineage relations is evident in the constraints on their sexuality, among these, circumcision,” Afterword to Aman, p.303.

In connection with this issue, Penelope Hetherington makes a pertinent comment regarding changing practices in connection with “the construction and control of marriage” in the modern state, particularly “the amount of bridewealth which can be extracted for a circumcised woman.” She believes that “[f]emale circumcision might cease to be defended if the processes of economic change made these transactions unimportant.” She further suggests that in this case “Western intervention on this issue may be at best irrelevant, at worst, counter productive.” “The Politics of the Clitoris: Contaminated Speech, Feminism and Female Circumcision,” African Studies Association of Australasia and the Pacific 19.1 (June 1997): 4-10, p.9.
FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS

Introduction
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Introduction

As Barbara Sheldon has remarked in a recent work: “There is hardly any comprehensive study on fathers and daughters in literature comparable to the studies which exist for mothers and daughters.”¹ According to Sheldon, who focuses on Western literature, with the recent disintegration of the traditional nuclear family and the concurrent importance of the father as a subject of study, “it is strange that the father and his relationship to the daughter have received relatively little attention from literary critics. Many of them, so intent on dealing with patriarchy, have neglected the father.”² Sheldon also cites Gisela Moffit who wrote a book on fathers and daughters in German novels of the 1970s: “[D]aughters and fathers have been the step-children of Western empirical research and scholarship. While much research on the family has been conducted in recent years, most of it has centered around the mother-daughter, mother-son, or father-son dyads, making fathers the ‘forgotten parents’ and daughters ‘the forgotten offspring’.”³

If such is the situation with regard to writing, both fictional and critical, in the West, to what extent is the father/daughter relationship considered in African writing? Although fewer examples of literary explorations spring to mind than those mentioned with regard to the mother/daughter relationship, nevertheless there are novels which feature a father/daughter relationship. Noteworthy among these are, in anglophone Africa, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions (1988), Buchi Emecheta’s The Family (1990) and Yvonne Vera’s Under the Tongue (1996) and, in francophone Africa, Aminata Sow
Fall’s *L’Ex-père de la nation* (1987), Véronique Tadjo’s *Le Royaume aveugle* (1990), Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle’s *Sous la cendre le feu* (1990) and Marie-Gisèle Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour* (1994). The best known of these, Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, which was the first novel to be published by a black Zimbabwean woman writer and which won the African section of the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1989, has formed the focus of considerable critical attention, although none of these critics deal explicitly with the father/daughter relationship. Indeed, it is generally true to say that very few critics have dealt with either the mother/daughter relationship or the father/daughter relationship in African fiction by women writers. Despite the lack of critical attention in this domain, the father/daughter relationship, even where it is not a major aspect of a particular work is nevertheless significant, as I shall seek to demonstrate.

The first novel to be considered, *Nervous Conditions*, is set in colonial Rhodesia during the 1960s and I discuss how both indigenous patriarchal traditions and Western patriarchy influence the two father/daughter relationships contained within this novel. In Sow Fall’s novel, *L’Ex-père de la nation*, I focus on the father/daughter relationship of an ex-President of an unnamed African nation and his youngest daughter. This novel complements Dangarembga’s in its exploration of patriarchal attitudes, the ex-President being considered a patriarch of both his family and of his nation. Tadjo’s *Le Royaume aveugle* is similar to Sow Fall’s novel in its treatment of an African kingdom whose head of state is initially at the height of his powers but who quickly loses command to his advisors. In both of these novels the daughter rebels against the politically corrupt system her father represents, although Tadjo’s treatment of this theme is more mythical and allegorical, while Sow Fall writes in a more “realist” mode. Emecheta’s novel *The Family* is set initially in the West Indies and subsequently in England, and I explore the two separate incidents of incest which the young protagonist is subjected to. The first occurs in the home of her grandmother and is initiated by a close family friend who acts as a father figure, and the subsequent assault takes place in the family home in England by the protagonist’s own father. The subject of incest also forms the point of discussion of two of the francophone novels, Ngolle’s *Sous la cendre le feu* and Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour*. The tone of these two novels shows a marked difference to Emecheta’s handling of the subject as they are both more melodramatic and adopt certain features of
romantic fiction. As my brief summary of the themes to be discussed in this chapter suggests, the subjects broached are of a tragic nature, but very few positive father/daughter relationships in African women’s writing have been located. Even if one widens the parameters and considers African male writing the father/daughter relationship appears marginalised and its focus is either the father/son or mother/son relationship, the latter being eulogised by writers in the Negritude tradition, as in Camara Laye’s L’Enfant noir (1954). With many of the father/daughter relationships explored in this chapter, the mother/daughter relationship is also significant and must therefore form part of the discussion. Like the mother/daughter relationships delineated in chapter two, there is little cause for optimism in the father/daughter relationships studied. The fathers of the female protagonists are either dictatorial, untrustworthy, unapproachable, or weak and misguided.

Before embarking on a detailed analysis of the novels it is necessary to point out the difficulty in attempting to define the underlying focus of these novels, that of patriarchy. Various commentators have acknowledged this difficulty, many of them pointing out the essentialising tendency which emerges in any such attempt. One such commentator Nira Yuval-Davis has stressed that patriarchy cannot be studied in isolation from other factors and that “women’s oppression is intermeshed in and articulated by other forms of social oppression and social divisions.” Another recent work on gender and development argues that “patriarchy in Africa is not a monolithic reality nor is it divorced from class and cultural influences.” The latter also notes that: “Patriarchy in Africa has its roots in African extended family systems and precapitalist familial modes of production that controlled both women’s productivity and reproduction.” In considering contemporary Africa, therefore, it is pertinent to question whether patriarchal structures have become weaker in more developed countries, which is precisely the question underlying Sylvia Walby’s article when she asks whether patriarchy is “in decline” or whether it has “merely changed form?” Also, pointing out the difficulties inherent in the definition of “patriarchy” itself, Walby suggests: “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women.” This definition is satisfactory as a general starting point, but it does tend towards essentialism because patriarchy is not just a preserve of men, but is
also perpetuated by women, a point to emerge in the context of the first novel to be studied, Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*.

**Questioning Patriarchy: Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions***

Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* is set in the 1960s in the author’s country of birth, Zimbabwe, a country which at that time still bore the name of Rhodesia. Unlike Maraire’s novel, *Zenzele*, there is very little reference to the fight for freedom by the indigenous people of Zimbabwe. *Nervous Conditions* traces the story of the young narrator and principal protagonist, Tambudzai Sigauke, or Tambu as she is called, and her life in rural Zimbabwe, her transferral to her uncle Babamukuru’s household and her education at his Mission school, and finally her attendance at a prestigious Catholic private girls’ school. In the development of the protagonist’s character and her growing sense of self and community, *Nervous Conditions* could be considered a female *Bildungsroman* and has been classified as such by at least one critic. Babamukuru is the head of a large family which includes his younger brother Jeremiah, who is largely uneducated and who depends upon his brother’s largesse for raising and educating his own family. It is also the story of Tambu’s cousin, Nyasha, Babamukuru’s daughter, and thus two biological father/daughter relationships are involved, that between Tambu and her father Jeremiah and that between Nyasha and her father, Babamukuru. The latter also acts as a father figure towards Tambu when she goes to live in his home and therefore I include this relationship in my father/daughter discussion. Not only is Babamukuru’s relationship with his daughter and his niece of interest but, from a broader perspective, he is also representative of both indigenous and Western patriarchy in this novel.

The father/daughter relationships in *Nervous Conditions* are related against a background of colonialism, resulting in the alienation of many of the protagonists and thereby compounding the problems already inherent in the father/daughter relationship. This alienation can be traced to two major causes. Firstly, to the historical fact of colonisation itself, whereby one culture imposes itself over another. This form of colonisation is pervasive in the novel and affects all the major characters. It is manifest
in both the Western religious and educational establishments which are virtually synonymous. It is also responsible for the poverty and oppression felt by Tambu’s family and many others like it, living in the “homelands” designated for them by their white masters. The other major cause of alienation is the traditional African patriarchal structure which is perpetuated by all the major male characters and colluded in also by some of the female characters. This traditional patriarchal attitude is most apparent in the narrator’s uncle, Babamukuru, due to his position as “head” of the family and also to the status and position accorded him because of his Western education.

There are several binary oppositions operating within the father/daughter dynamics contained in Nervous Conditions. Perhaps the major one is the differing relationship which exists between Tambu and her biological father and that between Tambu and her uncle Babamukuru. Her attitude towards the two is contrasted, her admiration and respect for Babamukuru and her total lack of respect for her own father who is a source of ridicule. Additionally, Nyasha’s and Tambu’s demeanour towards Babamukuru is compared and contrasted. Whereas Nyasha’s manner towards her father is disparaging because of his tendency to uncritically adopt certain of the West’s cultural values, Tambu can at first see no further than the prestige enjoyed by her uncle and his generous spirit in helping, first of all her brother Nhamo to be educated and then herself, upon her brother’s death. Additionally, at a narrative level a binary opposition operates by contrasting the spontaneous, naive recordings of the young protagonist’s attitude towards her uncle and that of the older narrator who has reflected upon and revised her earlier opinion of him from a more mature and informed vantage point.

At the novel’s beginning the narrator announces “I was not sorry when my brother died. Nor am I apologising for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling” (p.1). The reasons for this inability to “feel” she intimates will become apparent as her story unfolds, a story which also concerns “escape” and “entrapment” (p.1). Tambu first becomes aware of her feelings of resentment towards her brother, and her ambivalent status as a female in the face of indigenous patriarchy when she realises that her education is less of a priority than his. Whereas her mother sells vegetable to keep Nhamo in school, Tambu is told by her mother that a woman’s role is one of sacrifice, “And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of
womanhood on the other" (p.16). In this way Mainini points not only to the gendered aspects of a woman’s oppression but also to a colonial subjection which adds to a woman’s hardship. Tambu refuses to accept such a dictum and instead plants corn to pay for her education and, despite Nhamo’s attempts to prevent her efforts coming to fruition by stealing some of her vegetables, she is eventually successful in her endeavour. Nhamo appears to model his behaviour on that of his father for Jeremiah’s attitude towards his daughter’s education is equally dismissive, which causes growing resentment in Tambu. Jeremiah makes it clear that a girl’s education is a waste of time: “Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables” (p.15). Neither does he like to see her “over-absorbed in intellectual pursuits” (p.33), such as reading a scrap of newspaper used to wrap bread. He is afraid that reading will fill his daughter’s head “with impractical ideas, making [her] quite useless for the real tasks of feminine living” (p.33). By “feminine living” he is referring to her domestic chores and the fact that she will one day marry and be expected to wait upon her husband. He expects Tambu to obey his every whim which is extremely frustrating for her but the older narrator comments that since her “father was so obviously impossible” (p.33), and she would in any event never be able to please him, she might as well please herself instead. What Tambu comes to realise is that her father is in fact powerless both because of his poverty and his lack of interest in trying to improve his situation. He is thwarted in his quest to lay his hands on Tambu’s money set aside to pay for her education and from then on father and daughter exist “in peaceful detachment” (p.34). Tambu, therefore, by dint of determination and hard work is able to resist both her brother’s and her father’s efforts to keep her assigned to her designated role.

Tambu’s relationship with her uncle Babamukuru, who becomes a father to her, is more complex than her relationship with her own father. When her brother Nhamo dies and she takes his place living with her uncle and attending his Mission school, she believes that Babamukuru is taking care of her best interests. Thus she at first suspends all critical judgement concerning him. Babamukuru’s decision to further Tambu’s education however is not altogether altruistic for he needs Tambu’s help in raising his brother’s family out of its poverty. As Tambu replaces her brother in her uncle’s home, the journey from one household to the other reflects a definitive moment in her search
for knowledge. It is a major transition in her life and entails a definitive break with her previous existence. The total uprooting and forsaking of one culture for another, one world for another, even one identity for another is made clear by the narrator on the first evening of her arrival at the Mission: “Babamukuru and Maiguru [his wife] would now formally welcome me into their home; formally disinter me, my mind and my body from the village”(p.85). The relocation is not only physical, but mental, and the word “disinter” suggests that the narrator considers her relocation to be a kind of rebirth, but with sinister overtones, the older narrator intimating that such a move is not without its disadvantages which the younger protagonist is at the time unaware of. The total metamorphosis to be undergone by the narrator is also emphasised in her description of the process as that of a “reincarnation”(p.92), a word with religious connotations. Indeed, Tambu’s new life is in a way a kind of intellectual and spiritual rebirth with Babamukuru as her guiding spirit.

At first Tambu is overwhelmed not only by the richness of her surroundings but the power that Babamukuru possesses: “Babamukuru was God, therefore I had arrived in Heaven”(p.70). It is only gradually that she becomes aware of the oppressive nature of the male/female relations operating at the mission. This is evident in Tambu’s initial perception that her aunt’s lifestyle is one to be envied, especially in contrast to the one her own mother leads. Because of her aunt’s subservience towards Babamukuru, Tambu has no idea that her aunt is, like her husband, extremely well qualified academically. It is not until her aunt confides in her how much she has had to give up in her marriage, especially after having experienced life in England where other wider choices had been open to her, that Tambu realises that her aunt is far from perfectly happy. In Zimbabwe the money Maiguru earns is needed by Babamukuru to help look after his extended family, which even though it is a traditional African custom, leaves Maiguru resentful because she is not consulted. Even after listening to Maiguru’s complaints, however, Tambu still fails to acknowledge the reality of her aunt’s situation: “If it was necessary to efface yourself, as Maiguru did so well that you couldn’t be sure that she didn’t enjoy it, if it was necessary to efface yourself in order to preserve his [Babamukuru’s] sense of identity and value, then, I was sure, Maiguru had taken the correct decisions”(p.102).
Gradually, however, the dynamics in the relationship between Tambu and Babamukuru change. She starts to become aware of a different value system operating between them, especially when Babamukuru insists that her parents exchange wedding vows in a Christian wedding ceremony despite the fact that they have undergone a traditional marriage many years before. His decision is based upon his horror at his sister-in-law Lucia’s conduct at the dare called to sit in judgement of her for her “loose morals,” but, rejecting its patriarchal authority, she speaks in her own defence. Although Tambu does not approve of her uncle’s plans for her parents’ wedding, she is unable to tell him so as she has never previously questioned any of his decisions; her mind is split “into two disconnected entities” (p.167). On the morning of the wedding she experiences an almost mystical sense of being outside her own body and views the events from a distance when, unable to get out of bed, she informs her aunt and uncle of her decision. The choice that she feels she must make between either pleasing her uncle by attending her parents’ wedding or provoking his anger is, on a deeper level, a choice between two cultures, that of the traditional indigenous world of her forbears and that of the colonising nation, although Tambu herself is unaware of these wider concerns. She simply views the punishment meted out to her as “the price of [her] newly acquired identity” (p.169). Babamukuru feels justified in punishing Tambu: “Tambudzai is my brother’s daughter, I am her father. I have the right to discipline her. It is my duty” (172). That women are prepared to confront what they perceive to be an unjust authority is also seen in Maiguru’s own act of rebellion when she leaves her husband, even though only temporarily. Such rebellion on the part of Tambu, Lucia and Maiguru is indicative of a successful negotiation (and negation) of patriarchal power.

Tambu realises that if she were to accept unwaveringly Babamukuru’s values, life would be much easier for her, especially as she has witnessed Nyasha constantly challenging Babamukuru and the former’s resultant emotional turmoil. It is by observing Babamukuru’s relationship with Nyasha and listening to her critical insights concerning his character that Tambu becomes increasingly aware of the former’s shortcomings. Just as Tambu had been impressed with Babamukuru’s standing and knowledge so too is she impressed by Nyasha’s knowledge and her questioning mind, although she recognises the change in Nyasha when she returns from England: “I missed the bold,
ebullient companion I had who had gone to England but not returned from there” (p.51). While living at her uncle’s Tambu observes that her cousin is much more introspective. She confides in Tambu that in England she had learnt the importance of ideas such as equality for everyone, whereas when she returned to Zimbabwe she realised that such concepts were in reality worthless for she lived in an oppressed nation. Nyasha makes it clear that she would have preferred not to have accompanied her parents on their travels for, upon her return, her former school friends reject her and mock her English accent. As Nyasha comments: “They do not like my language, my English, because it is authentic, and my Shona because it is not!” (p.196). Nyasha’s feelings of confusion and cultural alienation culminate in a showdown with her father. In one way their relationship is typical of any inter-generational clash between a father and daughter where the father insists on limiting the amount of freedom enjoyed by his offspring. In Babamukuru’s relationship with his daughter, however, these differences are highlighted because there is the added complication of two different cultures involved and it is her own father who has exposed her to new cultural experiences and ideas. Babamukuru cannot tolerate that his daughter should attempt to act in the same manner in Zimbabwe as she did in England, even accusing Nyasha of being a whore for talking to one of her brother’s friends after a local dance. Neither is willing to compromise and their row quickly degenerates into a physical onslaught. The older narrator remembers:

feeling bad for her [Nyasha] and thinking how dreadfully familiar that scene had been, with Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I had felt victimised at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn’t depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn’t depend on any of the things I had thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them [...] But what I didn’t like was the way all the conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness. (pp.115-16)

If Nyasha receives little understanding from her father, her relationship with her mother also fails to provide her with the support that she needs. Although Maiguru attempts to pacify her husband so that he does not vent all his anger on their daughter, her behaviour does nothing in attempting to solve the root causes of the problems between them. Indeed, in her actions towards Babamukuru his wife often acts more like a child towards a parent than a wife towards a husband, seeking approval for everything she does. When she eventually walks out on her husband it is as a result of seeing Lucia obtain favours from him while he scarcely even acknowledges her own presence. Her conduct
in this instance has ramifications concerning her daughter's relationship with Babamukuru, for Nyasha realises that if her mother can stand up to her father, it may also be possible for her to do the same. As she explains to Tambu: "Sometimes I feel I'm trapped by that man, just like she is. But now she's done it, now she's broken out, I know it's possible so I can wait"(p.174). However, at the same time, Nyasha knows that the truth is not so simple "It's not really him you know. I mean not really the person. It's everything, it's everywhere. So where do you break out to? I don't know, Tambu, really I don't know"(174). She recognises that the differences between herself and her father are insurmountable and in a letter to Tambu who is at that time studying at the Catholic Convent school, she writes that she is doing her best not to antagonise him, admitting that she is hardly "the ideal daughter for a hallowed headmaster, a revered patriarch"(p.197). Nyasha perceives that her relationship with her father is part of a much larger problem. Even if she were to escape her father's influence, she suggests that there are even greater dilemmas to be faced, perhaps a reference to the colonial oppression which her country is undergoing and her own difficulties in coming to terms with her cultural dislocation.

Nyasha's fight with her father results in feelings of powerlessness and disillusion and causes her behaviour to undergo a marked change and she develops an eating disorder which in its symptoms of anorexia as well as bulimia could be considered a "Western" illness. Throughout the novel she is shown to be conscious of her weight in wishing to keep her slim figure, but it is after Tambu goes away to College and has no one to help her bear her father's authoritarian attitude that the eating disorder becomes apparent and her eating becomes "a battle of wills between her and her father"(p.189). It is noticeable that whenever they argue at the dinner table their row is deflected onto questions of food whereupon Babamukuru orders her to eat. She complies to avoid a confrontation but then vomits up this same food when she is out of his presence. When she finally breaks down she becomes delirious and her repressed alienation comes to the surface. In shredding her history books, "Their history. Fucking liars. Their bloody lies"(p.201), she shows the feelings of alienation she has suffered during her years of study. She seems to revert to her childhood when she asks her mother to hold her and nestles onto her lap: "'Look what they've done to us,' she said softly. 'I'm not one of them but I'm not one of you'"(p.201), intimating that she is not only an imitator of English culture, but
also that, unlike Tambu, she does not possess the link with her ancestral past which Tambu’s grandmother had bequeathed to her. She is a hybrid and because of her self-induced starvation, she does not possess the physical or emotional resources to assert any sort of control over her destiny, as witnessed in her symbolic return to childhood. Her parents are finally jolted into action, but the psychiatrist they consult believes that Nyasha cannot be ill as “Africans did not suffer in the way [they] had described” (p. 202). She eventually receives a more sympathetic hearing from a second psychiatrist consulted, but her recovery is in doubt.

Whereas Nyasha’s attempts to stifle her outspokenness against her father result in mental illness, Tambu continues to study hard and to accept Babamukuru’s authority. However, when Tambu wins a coveted scholarship to a private girls’ school, both Nyasha and Babamukuru oppose the idea. According to Nyasha the evils involved in such an education would outweigh the advantages:

It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, whereas the others – well really, who cared about the others? (pp. 178-79)

For Nyasha then the dangers of cultural assimilation are a real threat to Tambu’s identity. She sees her cousin’s education in terms of a calculated political project on the part of the coloniser to transform the colonised subject into a model citizen, morally upright and obedient to the imperialist ideology, indeed someone very much like Babamukuru himself.

On the other hand, although Babamukuru is also against Tambu accepting the scholarship, it is for a different reason, a certain moral laxity that he associates with too much freedom. Maiguru, however, supports Tambu’s further education, reminding her husband about the prejudice that exists against educated women and how moral decency is not a matter of which school one attends. Maiguru’s attitude towards her niece’s education is contrasted with that of Tambu’s own mother who believes that a further immersion in the English-style education system will alienate her daughter from her own culture even further. Before Nhamo’s death, Mainini had witnessed her son become increasingly estranged from his family, especially as loses his native Shona
language. Ultimately there is a complete breakdown in communication and for Mainini, her son’s death, alluded to by the narrator in the first sentence of the novel, has symbolically already taken place. Although she wishes her son to be educated “even more, she wanted to talk to him” (p.53).

Despite the various misgivings as to the dangers of assimilation facing Tambu she demonstrates at several instances during the novel that she has a greater understanding of her situation than might at first be assumed. Her implicit loyalty to her own cultural background is hinted at in a conversation which takes place with Nyasha about whether Maiguru will have the courage to leave her husband, Babamukuru. Tambu reflects that:

Nyasha knew nothing about leaving. She had only been taken to places – to the mission, to England, back to the mission. She did not know what essential parts of you stayed behind no matter how violently you tried to dislodge them in order to take them with you. (p.173)

For Tambu the opportunity to go to the college is a chance to overthrow finally the burdens of her own past, but she instinctively realises that she will never be able to forget it. “How could I possibly forget my brother and the mealies, my mother and the latrine and the wedding? [...] Going to the convent was a chance to lighten those burdens by entering a world where burdens were light” (p.179). Despite the hardship of her early life, Tambu is less exposed to the crises of identity suffered by her cousin Nyasha, for she has not had to experience the same process of assimilation.

The epigraph to Nervous Conditions, “The condition of native is a nervous condition” is taken from Sartre’s introduction to Franz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, and is a recognition of the mental and psychological dangers of colonisation. Many of the novel’s protagonists are subject to this condition and, as we have seen, a nervous disorder is primarily evident in Nyasha. However, she is not the only example, Tambu herself showing signs of a nervous ailment during her attempts at self-assertion, especially on the occasion of her parents’ Christian wedding. The older generation too is affected, Babamukuru himself often exhibiting signs of nervous anxiety which culminate in an explosion of irrational behaviour when faced with Nyasha’s misdeameanors. Maiguru also seems to act in an inappropriate manner when she assumes a childlike behaviour, while Tambu’s mother becomes ill when faced with the loss of her daughter to “Englishness.” Her illness, like that of Nyasha’s, includes a
rejection of food, self-neglect, and a withdrawal into herself, but she is "saved" by the
vigorous administrations of her sister Lucia in contrast to Tambu's neglect in not
responding to Nyasha's tormented letters. The implication is that in order to survive
such mental distress there must be some form of solidarity available to aid the
recuperative process. In the preface to Fanon's work Sartre states: "Everything will be
done to wipe out their [the indigenous people's] traditions, to substitute our language for
theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours."20 Such a perspective has
been evident in Nervous Conditions, but as we have seen, and as commentators have
noted in colonial discourse, the perspective of the female colonial subject is often
omitted.21 The author of Nervous Conditions however explores the subjectivity of
several female colonial subjects, thereby giving voice to questions of gender and raising
issues of patriarchal, as well as colonial, oppression. In this way, she reflects how under
colonialism "African women were subject to interlocking forms of oppression: to the
racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination."22
Thus, if there is little choice for the male colonised subject, women are even more
limited in their choices for they are also subject to the indigenous patriarchal system.
When Tambu later questions her attitude towards her brother, wondering if she has been
too callous towards him, and whether perhaps Nhamo had realised what he said was
unreasonable, she reminds herself that since then she had "met so many men who
consider themselves responsible adults and therefore ought to know better, who still
subscribe to the fundamental principles of my brother's budding elitism, that to be fair to
him I must conclude that he was sincere in his bigotry"(p.49).

The novel Nervous Conditions charts the growth in wisdom and self-knowledge of the
narrator, someone who is able to question the value of her Western education: "I was
young then and able to banish things, but seeds do grow. Although I was not aware of it
then, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart and what it represented as a sunrise on my
horizon"(p.203). At the novel's conclusion it would seem that the possibilities of
"escape" and "entrapment," mentioned by the narrator at the beginning of her story, are
more a state of mind than a spatial displacement. She has witnessed attempts of
solidarity on the part of some of the women of her family but recognises that their
identity has already been constructed for them by a patriarchal society whose oppressive
regime has caused a sort of internalising of oppression and a resultant helplessness.
They have thus retreated into their assigned roles through fear of “threat and assault and neglect” (p. 138).

Just as women collude in their own oppression so too is the collusion of a whole people hinted at in the continuation of the citation already quoted in the novel’s preface: “The status of native is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonized people with their consent” (p. 17). However, this “consent” is shown in the terms of the novel to be rather a means of self-preservation on the part of the indigenous person rather than of complicity. When Babamukuru is asked to leave Rhodesia to study in England he

was appreciative of the opportunity that had been offered; and further, to decline would have been a form of suicide. The missionaries would have been annoyed by his ingratitude. He would have fallen from grace with them and they would have taken under their wings another promising young African in his place. (p. 14)

Given that his mother “being sagacious and having foresight, had begged them [the missionaries] to prepare him for life in their world” (p. 19) when he was still a child, he is indoctrinated into the system at a young age. Education is seen as a means whereby he, and other members of his family, can improve their impoverished life. Moreover, concerning his children’s education, he feels that he has little choice but to take them with him to South Africa and England for, although his mother wanted him to leave them behind, he did not want them to suffer “the want and hardship” (p. 14) he himself had suffered as a child and he also wanted to be in a position to supervise their education. In this respect we can see that Tambu’s behaviour follows that of Babamukuru to a certain extent, because both the patriarch and the surrogate daughter strive to distance themselves from their poor origins.

During Tambu’s journey to self-knowledge she gradually distances herself from a paternal and patriarchal influence and comes to realise the importance of the maternal, matriarchal bequest, but both these influences are compounded by the colonising system and also the class system. With regard to questions of class and material benefit, she initially identifies more with her Uncle Babamukuru and her Aunt Maiguru than with her own parents. Gender in this instance is ignored. She seeks endorsement in her uncle’s middle-class household to the point of an uncaring indifference towards her parents. When she describes her journey to her uncle’s house, she remarks:
There was no room for what I left behind. My father, as affably, shallowly agreeable as ever, was insignificant. My mother, my anxious mother, was no more than another piece of surplus scenery to be maintained, of course to be maintained, but all the same superfluous, an obstacle in the path of my departure. (p.58)

In the interests of material gain she makes a conscious decision to identify with her aunt: “I decided it was better to be like Maiguru, who was not poor and had not been crushed by the weight of womanhood”(p.16), but she later comes to realise that her mother was indeed correct in some of her beliefs, especially those concerning the insidious nature of colonialism: “Mother knew a lot of things and I had regard for her knowledge”(p.203). The older narrator realises that she had been too easily influenced by Babamukuru’s power: “My vagueness and my reverence for my uncle, what he was, what he had achieved, what he represented and therefore what he wanted, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position”(p.164).

At the end of the novel however Tambu has found her own path, which both endorses and rejects aspects of the paternal and maternal influences on her. The novel appears to suggest that the colonial process, including its education system, cannot just be ignored, a position advocated by Tambu’s mother. Instead, its advantages must be sought, but in a discriminating manner. By means of her education Tambu is able to share her growth in knowledge by telling of experiences: “Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story” (p.204).

Despotic Fatherhood: Aminata Sow Fall’s L’Ex-père de la nation and Véronique Tadjo’s Le Royaume aveugle

Unlike Tambu in Nervous Conditions, the daughter in Aminata Sow Fall’s L’Ex-père de la nation, does not have access to an active narrative voice. Her beliefs and actions and any father/daughter discussions are only ever reported by the narrating father. Indeed, the daughter, Nafi, is very much a symbol of protest against her father’s despotic rule rather than a living, breathing protagonist whose character is developed, unlike that of her father, Madiama. The novel opens with former President Madiama recounting his
memoirs from a prison cell where he has been confined after a coup d'état. His is a
disenchanted life. He had started his Presidency with much optimism, wishing above all
to be a faithful servant to his people. However, he is shown to be a weak figure who is
unable to control the machinations of his advisors and the demands of his foreign
creditors. In a similar manner, his personal life disintegrates when, after a happy
marriage to his first wife, Coura, he takes as a second wife Yandé, who not only forms
her own power base with its political intrigue and corruption and thereby hastens his
downfall as President, but is also the cause of Coura’s breaking off all intimate relations
with him. Already, in Sow Fall’s use of the word “père” [father] in her title, the image
of the personal and domestic sphere is intertwined with the word’s political
connotations, “father of the nation”, but there is also a play on words in the French title.
Not only is Madiama a “former father of the nation”, the novel’s literal title, he is also
the “expert” of the nation, which is the word produced when “ex-père” is vocalised.
Clearly Sow Fall’s title is therefore ironic, for Madiama is shown to be thoroughly inept
as his nation’s President. In this way, also, Sow Fall points to Madiama’s ineptitude on
a personal as well as a political level.

The father/daughter relationship in this novel, that between Madiama and Nafi, his
youngest daughter, is relegated to its margins. We very rarely see father and daughter
together and then only in scenes of confrontation. The lack of harmony in their
relationship appears to be caused by the fact that Nafi’s mother Coura is estranged from
her husband when Nafi is just an infant, even though she still lives in the Presidential
palace. Certainly Madiama blames Coura for having turned their daughter against
him. “J’avais fini par croire que Coura lui avait inoculé ce ressentiment sourd et
tenace qui avait dressé entre elle et moi un mur de béton armé depuis le jour de mon
mariage avec Yandé”(p.54) [I ended up believing that Coura had caused [Nafi’s] veiled
and persistent resentment which had come between us, like a wall of reinforced
concrete, since the day of my marriage to Yandé]. The image used by Madiama to
suggest the extent of Nafi’s antipathy underlines the very real impasse in their
relationship. This image also presages that of the walls of the Presidential palace at the
time of the people’s rebellion for, it is there, “juste devant le Château”(p.143) [just in
front of the castle] that Nafi is trampled upon and meets her death.
This lack of closeness between Madiama and Nafi is prefigured from the time when Nafi is still only a baby, carried on her mother’s back into her father’s presidential quarters. In this scene the intimacy of mother and daughter is contrasted with the father/daughter relationship, adversely affected as Coura makes her feelings known. She states her intention to be a wife to Madiama in name only, because he has taken a second wife. Coura tells Madiama of her feelings of betrayal, particularly as both she and Madiama had sworn to Madiama’s mother that they would stay together always. Although both Madiama and Coura are Muslims, so Madiama is therefore legally entitled to remarry, Coura can legitimately feel betrayed by her husband as he does not follow the rules governing such procedures and only informs Coura after the wedding ceremony has taken place. Coura, who is an orphan and who is Madiama’s mother’s niece, has been raised by Madiama’s mother very much in her own image and she had always intended that Coura should marry her son. In a very symbolic gesture, Coura, still breastfeeding Nafi, unfolds her garments in order to uncover one of her breasts and releases some of her milk which she directs toward her husband’s mouth, repeating the words “Je suis ta mère Coumba Dado Sadio” (p.59) [I am your mother Coumba Dadio Sadio]. She explains to Madiama that she will become the reincarnation of his mother to remind him of his shameful actions. This scene has been interpreted as a sign of incest. Referring to a similar remark by Christopher Miller on Mariama Ba’s Une si longue lettre, Mary-Kay Miller suggests that “In both cases, by handpicking and forming the women whom their sons will marry, mothers create incestuous relationships, first by making these women sisters to the men in question and ultimately by turning them into younger versions of themselves.” Miller argues that by such means these mothers-in-law seek to continue their authority and power. However, such a deduction seems to be a misreading of Sow Fall’s novel, for Coura makes it clear that no sexual relations will ensue from this time. She is willing to sacrifice the intimate side of their marriage, and ultimately derives a sense of joy and power from doing so: “sache que je ne suis pas malheureuse, au contraire! J’érprouve une joie profonde d’exprimer mon droit à l’existence quand tout apparemment, concourait à m’écraser” (p.59) [Know that I am not unhappy. On the contrary, I experience a deep joy at expressing my right to exist when everything would seem to work to my destruction].
The above scene transforms not only Coura’s life, but also Madiama’s. Henceforth, in Coura’s eyes at least, Madiama is relegated to the position of a child. Madiama’s change in status is further underlined when, as Coura leaves Madiama’s room, she lifts Nafi from her back and begins to breastfeed her. There is clearly an analogy here between the milk Coura has just directed at Madiama’s open mouth and her act of feeding her own daughter, Nafi, which suggests a brother/sister connection between these two rather than that of a father/daughter relationship. Indeed, when Coura tells Madiama that she will take over his dead mother’s role, she again assigns him to the status of Nafi’s brother, rather than her father. This abdication of the fatherly role, although only expressed in symbolic terms, is nevertheless literally acted out. The visual symbolism of Coura’s presence with her baby totally dependent upon her highlights the magnitude of Madiama’s betrayal and what he is prepared to relinquish. It is thus clear that by taking a second wife, not only does Madiama destroy his relationship with his wife Coura, but he also jeopardises the one between him and his daughter.

The distance in the relationship between Madiama and his daughter, intimated in the imagery just discussed, is suggested in the very few scenes which show father and daughter present together, this distance also reflected in Madiama’s relationship with his people in his capacity as “father” of the nation. In fact, there appears to be a parallel movement in these two relationships, the personal and the political. Just as, in his early married life, Madiama had been a considerate husband and loving father towards Nafi and his other children, so too, at the beginning of his presidential reign, does he act in a fatherly manner towards the populace, wanting only the best for them. At the beginning of his reign his “but était l’épanouissement du peuple” (p.13) [aim was the fulfilment of the people]. In his early married life, Madiama is employed as a nurse in the State Health Care System, a “caring” profession. Not only is Madiama shown to indeed care for his patients, his loyalty towards them extends to fighting corruption in this system, when he sees that health care items are being misdirected by the hospital staff. He is also determined to combat such corruption by instigating a union movement for which he is imprisoned, but the union movement succeeds and Madiama’s political career begins. However, ironically, such acts of corruption not only in the health system, but in all areas, are even more widespread during his presidential reign. Unfortunately
Madiama seems to have lost his former strength of character and is thus unable to minister to his people’s needs. Madiama’s weakness as President is rendered all the more poignant because these earlier episodes of his life are told in flashback intermittently throughout the novel, thereby contrasting Madiama’s former values with his loss of moral fortitude during his presidency.

Madiama’s positioning as a child by his wife in the domestic sphere is replicated in his childlike naivety in attempting to solve his country’s problems. Not only is he unable to fulfil his duties as “father” of the nation, but he also refers to himself as “child of the country” at several instances, for example: “Un enfant du pays pour le destin du peuple, cela manquait depuis si longtemps!” (p.13) [A child of the country for the people’s destiny, that had been missing for such a long time]. Although such references denote that Madiama is a native inhabitant of his country, on a figurative level there is also the suggestion that he does indeed act like a child in his incapacity to assert himself in his dealings with others. Where he should lead, he is led by his advisors, especially the corrupt Andru. Where he should be fearless, he is fearful, especially of the power at his disposal: “Le pouvoir m’était soudain apparu comme quelque chose de très sérieux et de trop lourd” (p.12) [Power suddenly seemed to me like something very serious and too heavy]. Indeed, he even plays the role of a child in his relations with the former colonial powers: “Contrôlant les secteurs névralgiques, elle avait d’abord laissé faire avec l’œil narquois de l’adulte qui attend l’appel au secours de son fils” (p.21) [Controlling the vital sectors, it [the colonial authority] had at first allowed [us] free reign with the sardonic eye of the adult who is waiting for his son to cry for help]. Ironically, the one time that he does assert his authority with regard to Andru is in relation to his daughter, which inadvertently causes her death. Andru had suggested sending Nafi abroad to distract her from her political interests, which he believes were damaging to her father. Madiama however “avait tenu bon” (p.91) [had held firm] and so his daughter was able to continue her opposition to her father’s political beliefs unhindered, hence her presence at the riots where she is killed.

Madiama’s immaturity is also apparent in his reaction to Nafi’s growing political awareness, in the way that he takes his daughter’s actions personally, believing that she is becoming “de plus en plus étrangère” (p.113) [increasingly a stranger] to him.
Confronting Nafi, Madiama insists on knowing why she colludes with his enemies. Her response is to contest the contrary nature of his own actions for she reminds him that, in his speeches to the nation, he advocates political freedom of choice and tolerance. Such reasoning by Nafi may be the impetus for Madiama’s decision to resign. Her influence in this decision is further intimated when, at the moment of his decision, he imagines his daughter’s reaction and approval: “Nafi serait alors accourue vers moi: ‘Papa, je ne t’aurais jamais cru une telle grandeur!’ Et elle aurait sauté à mon cou. Mais je n’osais pas y croire” (p. 117) [Then Nafi would then run up to me. ‘Father, I wouldn’t have thought you capable of such greatness!’ And she would have thrown her arms round my neck. But I did not dare believe it]. The latter qualifying words presage Madiama’s inability to put into operation his wish to resign, as well as his continuing estrangement from his daughter.

Madiama’s failure to resign as President is due to the weak position he finds himself in, especially in relation to Andru who threatens him should he implement his decision. Subsequent to the rebellion when his daughter is killed, Madiama’s kindly, fatherly stance towards his people changes into a desire for vengeance: more and more stringent measures take away the few remaining freedoms. The underground press produces a pamphlet showing a picture of Nafi running on a lawn and laughing happily, “un rire franc, joyeux, libre. Un rire que je ne lui avais jamais vu” (p. 149) [a frank, joyous, free laugh. A laugh of hers that I had never witnessed], these words again stressing the distance in the father/daughter relationship. The photograph is followed by the caption: “Elan brisé par les balles de son père” (p. 149) [Vitality crushed by her father’s bullets]. The opposition believes that he is responsible for his daughter’s death with his ever increasing repressive measures. Instead of realising that he is indeed, due to his own weakness, in part responsible, he blames the people whom he now hates: “Plus je regardais ce peuple, plus je le détestais” (p. 164) [The more I saw of the people the more I hated them]. He even goes so far as to use his daughter’s death to excuse his conduct in agreeing with Andru’s ever increasing oppressive measures. Nafi’s death parallels the many more deaths suffered by Madiama’s anonymous “children” of the nation until he is removed from office by a political coup.
The fact that Sow Fall sets her exploration of a corrupt and inept government in an unnamed African country confers upon it a universal, rather than a specific, application. In this way she is able to focus criticism on general features of many post-independent African nations, including government nepotism and corruption and the political manipulation of the former colonial powers. Several commentators have noted the similarity between Sow Fall’s *L’Ex-père de la nation* and Sembène Ousmane’s *Le Dernier de l’empire*, one critic, Peter Hawkins, suggesting that Sow Fall offers “a rival interpretation of the themes of Sembène’s earlier novel” by “resituating the debate in a general, non-identifiable context and re-posing the problem in moral terms rather than in social, economic or political ones.” I would additionally argue that Sow Fall stresses the ramifications of the abuse of political power in “emotional” terms, on personal relationships, whether it be a trusted parent, a loved wife or a recalcitrant daughter.

One novel which has not been mentioned in comparison with Sow Fall’s novel is Véronique Tadjo’s *Le Royaume aveugle*, perhaps because this author is not so well known as Sembène Ousmane or Chinua Achebe. This novel also privileges a father/daughter relationship, in which the father, King Ato IV, abuses his power as head of state. Although initially he dotes on his daughter, Akissi, her political aspirations, opposed to those of her father, cause a rupture, especially when she falls in love with his political opponent, Karim. At the behest of Karim, Akissi escapes from her father’s influence by fleeing the “Kingdom of the Blind People” and staying with his mother, far away from the capital city. The barrier which exists between Nafi and Madiama in Sow Fall’s novel also exists between Akissi and her father. In an imagined conversation, she tells him how she feels: “Nous sommes des inconnus. Toute ma vie, j’ai vécu à tes côtés, et pourtant, nous ne nous connaissons pas. Toi et moi cloîtrés dans nos mondes sans jamais nous rencontrer” (p.37) [We are strangers to one another. All my life I’ve lived by your side and yet we don’t know one another. You and I cloistered in our worlds without ever meeting one another]. Such a barrier is indicative of the poor relationship which also exists between the King and his courtiers and supporters, and the rest of the inhabitants of the country, known as “Les Autres” [The Others] who live in shanty towns on the edges of the city which are occasionally demolished by the police.
During Akissi’s absence there is an attempt at a political coup but it fails and its ringleaders are arrested, including Karim. Akissi returns to the city and tries to persuade Karim to repent publicly, in which case her father has promised that he will be pardoned. Karim refuses; the king loses all reason and has his daughter imprisoned. The Kingdom of the Blind finally begins to collapse and in the novel’s epilogue, Karim’s death by hanging is described as is Akissi’s delivery of twins, a boy and a girl. Not only does the birth of Akissi’s twins signify a hope in the future, but their sex also adds to this optimism. King Ato IV had “disposed” of his wife, Akissi’s mother, because she had been too powerful and he had not wanted to share his rule with her. He was willing for Akissi to inherit his kingdom, even though he longed for a son who would have helped him “conquérir le monde entier!” (p.16) [conquer the entire world!]. Akissi’s lament for her mother at one point in the novel suggests that such a relationship would betoken a closeness and harmony lacking in her relationship with her father. In the birth of her twins, born of two parents who believe in a more just society, the future may indeed contain the seeds of hope with its balance of male and female.

I introduce Tadjo’s novel into my discussion due to its similarity in subject matter to Sow Fall’s novel. Although Tadjo’s novel is pessimistic in many places, its ending, with the survival of Akissi and the birth of her twins is finally optimistic juxtaposed with Safi’s death in Sow Fall’s novel, and a continuation of despotic rule. Sow Fall’s more “realistic” treatment of the destruction of a tyrant is in contrast with Tadjo’s more mythical, allegorical narrative but the latter also contains more realistic allusions, such as references to the shanty towns and a police state which have more in common with the tone of Sow Fall’s novel. Both novels contain references to numerous African dictatorships, the primarily mythical nature of Tadjo’s work pointing to the underlying propensity in human kind’s nature in the construction of such systems of hegemony whereas Sow Fall bases her exploration of human nature in a more traditional exploration of character motivation and interpersonal relationships.

The Diasporean Connection: Buchi Emecheta’s The Family
Buchi Emecheta’s *The Family* also tackles the ramifications of the abuse of power, but its focus is on the issue of incest and the betrayal of the father by the daughter in one particular family. The dictionary definition of incest is “the crime of sexual intercourse or cohabitation between persons related within the degrees within which marriage is prohibited.” It must be acknowledged, however, that the particular forms of the incest taboo, in relation to the sort of behaviour which is forbidden, to whom it applies and how it is dealt with, vary depending upon the particular culture or society. In discussing the issue of incest I adopt Emily Driver and Audrey Droise’s definition in the introduction to their work on child sexual abuse, as:

> the sexual molestation of a child by any person whom that child sees as a figure of trust or authority – parents, relatives (whether natural or adoptive), family friends [...] etc. We see the questions of blood-relationship and taboo as red herrings which obscure the central issue: the irresponsible exploitation of children’s ignorance, trust and obedience. Incest is the sexual abuse of power.

Such a definition acknowledges that it is the question of the abuse of trust, rather than just one of blood ties, with its concomitant abuse of power, which is significant in such abuse. Apparently Emecheta first conceived the idea of treating such a subject when, after giving a college lecture, a number of girls went to her room afterwards and disclosed to her that they had been sexually abused by their fathers. Emecheta had already dealt with the subject of rape in her novel *The Rape of Shavi* as well as in *Destination Biafra*, but in *The Family* she transposes the random, violent anonymity of rape described in these earlier works into an exploration of sexual abuse which is perpetrated by a close family member, one that may be more calculated and accompanied by a personal betrayal by someone in a position of trust. Another new venture for Emecheta is the fact that she is dealing with a West Indian family rather than her more usual Nigerian protagonists, although some of the latter are also presented. However, the theme of migration is not new and has been broached in several of her novels including *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and *Kehinde* (1994) in these cases emigration from Nigeria to England.

The novel opens as Gwendolen, a young Jamaican girl, aged five, is readying herself to say farewell to her father, Winston Brillianton, who is leaving to work abroad in England, “the moder kontry” as it is referred to in the novel. Shortly afterwards he
sends for his wife Sonia, who assures Gwendolen that she too will be sent for as soon as they are able to afford to do so. In the meantime, she is to live with her Grandmother Naomi, Sonia’s mother, in Granville, a very poor area of Jamaica where they endure a constant battle for survival. During this time Gwendolen is kept busy helping her grandmother, with little time or money for schooling, her parents neglecting to send money as time goes by. A constant companion and occasional lover of her grandmother, Uncle Johnny, who has always acted kindly towards Gwendolen, enters her bed one night when Naomi has fallen asleep and rapes her when she is still only ten years old. Some years later she is eventually sent for by her parents and is at first overjoyed to find herself welcomed into the midst of her family, even though she is expected to work hard helping her mother with the housework and bringing up her younger brothers and sister born in England. When Sonia returns to Jamaica a few years later because she learns that her own mother is sick, Gwendolen is left in charge of the family and her father sexually abuses his daughter. She becomes pregnant and everyone believes the father to be a young Greek boy, Emmanuel. Her father’s sudden death, and her mother’s refusal to visit her, leave her no choice but to make an independent life for herself with her newly born baby girl, with the support of Emmanuel and an eventual reconciliation with her mother.

As can be seen from this synopsis of the novel, Gwendolen’s young life is marked by affliction, both in her native Jamaica and in her adoptive country, England. The unfortunate circumstances are not only caused by the two acts of incest, but also by being abandoned by both parents while still only a young girl. Gwendolen is not too affected by her father’s departure because he is away much of the time working anyway, but when her mother also leaves, she feels abandoned and alone, especially as her mother does not seem dismayed at the prospect of leaving her daughter: “it looked as if her Mammy was happy to leave her behind, giving the impression she was not really wanted”(p.18). Many Caribbean novels stress the close relationship enjoyed between grandmother and granddaughter and it appears to be normal practice for the grandmother to assume the mother role without causing any problems for the child. However, in Gwendolen’s case, her relationship with her grandmother is not particularly close, the latter mainly preoccupied by the daily battle for survival and unable to lavish too much care and attention on her charge. Additionally, she is betrayed by her uncle.
Johnny, who is very much like a father figure to her and liked and respected by everyone she cares for. Her confusion is therefore all the more pronounced when she is subjected to his sexual assault. Gwendolen’s description of his actions underlines his use of force, a hand over her mouth, combined with persuasion, accompanied by his assurance that he will protect and care for her. Moreover, he plays on Gwendolen’s loneliness and sense of abandonment by her parents: “Your Mammy gone na England to join your Daddy. Dem no want you dere, but me look after you, right? [...] Don’t tell nobody, because they’ll say you’re a bad gal”(p.22). In these words we see the same blending of threats and promise of protection. When her ordeal is over Gwendolen runs outside and asks “Mammy, why you no take me with you?”(22). Such a question, directly after the incident of incest, appears to be an indictment by the author of an act of mother/daughter betrayal.

Emecheta’s treatment of incest points to many of the traditional motifs surrounding this subject, especially those concerning the psychological make-up of the victim. According to sociological literature, victims of sexual abuse are prone to self-blame and guilt. As a consequence of these two factors they are less likely to be able to speak out against their aggressor. In the case of Gwendolen’s rape by her Uncle Johnny, she feels both confused and guilty. She is confused when, the morning after the rape, her Uncle arrives earlier than usual to help her Grandmother on her bee-farm, acting perfectly normally. Gwendolen cannot understand this if what her Uncle had done to her the previous night was wrong. She starts to feel guilty without understanding why, except that she thought that “everyone would blame her if they knew her secret,”(p.25) especially as everyone seemed to think so highly of him. After submitting to repeated acts of sexual assault, Gwendolen runs away to her paternal grandmother, but receiving a lukewarm reception, her dark skin being too black for her light relative, she decides to return and tell her Grandmother Naomi about Uncle Johnny’s behaviour. Although Naomi is outraged, and he is ostracised by most of the community, at the same time Gwendolen is blamed and suspected of complicity. Her grandmother starts to criticise her behaviour incessantly, hinting that she was herself the cause of Uncle Johnny’s attentions. She wants to know “why she always rolled her backside when she moved about” and “How come Uncle Johnny did not trouble the other girls?”(p.36). Her grandmother misses her friend’s company and especially his help, so loneliness and
tiredness provoke harsh treatment towards Gwendolen, with constant beatings and public humiliations about her bedwetting, which appears to worsen after Johnny’s unwelcome attentions. Gwendolen’s suffering from a trusted adult’s sexual interference is therefore compounded by her grandmother’s treatment: she feels totally betrayed by the adult world.

When Gwendolen first hears that she is finally to join her parents in England, she believes that all her problems will dissolve and that she will be able to “be herself – happy, trusting, Gwendolen again” (p. 39). However, there are signs at her initial meeting with her father at the airport that they will have problems. Winston finds it difficult to recognise that Gwendolen is indeed his daughter and is ill at ease at his daughter’s enthusiastic greeting. He “was surprised and uneasy at the antics of this little girl, who was his daughter and whom he was beginning to realize he had to work hard and wake up fatherly feelings towards” (p. 49). When she arrives back at her parents’ home, her mother also finds difficulty in relating to a daughter who she also perceives as an adult. To underline the discrepancy in her parents’ conception of her, Gwendolen is described as reverting to childlike behaviour on seeing both her father and her mother: “Gwendolen cried as she rushed into her mother’s open arms. She felt reborn. She felt as if she was entering into her mother’s womb again” (p. 52).

The emphasis by Gwendolen’s parents on her adult looks foreshadows their treatment of her as older than her years. Sonia sees in her daughter someone who will lighten her domestic tasks, while Winston begins to regard her in a new light, based on sexual attraction rather than fatherly devotion. Moreover, her mother recognises her husband’s new interest in her daughter when she arrives home one day to find her enjoying a joke with her father. Sonia is furious: “‘June-June, why you sit dere laughing with your Daddy and Ronald? Me give you work fe do, before me go to market. You sit dere laughing with men, eh, Marm?’ Anger blazed in every word” (p. 87). Sonia’s outbursts at the appearance of closeness between father and daughter is provoked by jealousy and hence also feelings of inadequacy. Gwendolen is dismayed to discover that her mother is giving her “the eye of suspicion Granny Naomi gave her a long time ago in Granville” (p. 88). She wants to forget her past and cannot understand her mother’s attitude as “Daddies did not hurt their daughters” (p. 88). From that time onwards
Gwendolen becomes more cautious and slowly her trust and confidence which had started to increase in England begin to waver.

Upon Sonia’s departure for Jamaica, Gwendolen assumes her mother’s role in the home and it is at this time that her father makes his sexual demands manifest when he enters her bed one night. He attempts to excuse his intentions towards his daughter by describing her as a “woman teasing a lover”(p.144). The fact that Gwendolen also resembles her mother, not just physically but in her mental make-up, adds to his temptation. She was “the type of woman he favoured, small, vulnerable, just like his Sonia”(p.144). Evidently he is attracted to weaker women and needs to be in a position of power. Nevertheless, he expects Gwendolen to “fight him off like any other woman. Because she was like any other woman to him. She was almost grown before she came back into his life”(p.144). He is embroiled in the gendered discourse of his upbringing where women are expected to resist a man’s attentions and in this way perpetuate his sexual anticipation. However, Winston’s remembrance of that night is different to Gwendolen’s version of events. According to him, Gwendolen is easily persuaded to consent to the sexual act, but Gwendolen recollects that “She could not scream, because though he begged, he covered her mouth with that strong hand of his”(p.145). She remembers also getting into trouble if you told of what happened. Winston’s egotism is apparent when he discovers his daughter is not a virgin, evident in his outcry: “‘You allow men to do this to you before, June-June?’ the enraged father cried. He thought he was going to be the first. What a disappointment”(p.145). In this way the narrator stresses the contradictions inherent in Winston’s attitude, the double standard between his own conduct and what he expects from his daughter. Moreover, such an attitude underlines how Gwendolen is being induced to take on the “wifely” role, as Winston plays the part of the jealous “husband” who is devastated that she does not fulfil the standards of sexual chastity he expects. The hypocrisy behind this double standard is made clear when, the following day, Gwendolen is forced to listen to her father preach against the sins of the world, such as the evils of adultery: “No one knew why the easy-going Winston, whose tiny wife Sonia could bully him into silence at home, talked so brutally about women whenever he took the pulpit”(p.113). There is a hint here of a deep-seated misogyny which may result from a poor self-image and lack of authority, certainly in respect to his wife. However, his lack of interpersonal skills are no
hindrance to him in his role as declaimer of the faith when he is given the power to speak and to be heard without interruption.

In contrast, Gwendolen copes by retreating into herself, as she had done in Granville, accepting her father’s sexual attentions without resistance, “suffering his anger and guilt” (p.146). He becomes like a stranger to her “And for this somebody else, she had to lie very still, because she had no solid and protective Daddy to shield her any more” (p.146). Just as she had suffered from guilt when sexually abused in Jamaica, she feels guilty once more for being unable to stop her father. In fact, her reaction to this new rape is shown to be governed by her previous treatment by Johnny, how he had insisted that “Every gal done done it. Dat’s why they’re girls” (p.145). Just as she did in Granville, she feels isolated, unable to confide in anyone, and runs away. She also fears that if she were to tell, her father might be put in prison, causing her family to disintegrate. Thus, to some extent at least, the first act of sexual abuse governs her reactions to the second, and there are other parallels. When the social worker is trying to uncover the circumstances of Gwendolen’s pregnancy, Sonia tells her that Gwendolen rolls her waist inside as well as outside the house. This is reminiscent of her Grandmother’s reference to Gwendolen’s walking in a certain manner inside as well as outside the house and intimates Sonia’s unvoiced and probably unacknowledged suspicions about her husband.

In describing Gwendolen’s reaction to incest, especially her decision to run away in both cases, Emecheta is again reinforcing sociological findings. Whereas in Granville, Gwendolen is forced to return to her Grandmother Naomi’s because her other grandmother did not offer her a warm welcome, in London she receives more sympathetic treatment in a mental institution. There she is given more personal autonomy than ever before, counselled as to her options, and is allowed to decide whether she wishes to see her parents. She is also not forced to name the father of her child. When her parents do eventually visit her, she describes her father “standing as solid as an oak by the window. His standing there radiated dependability and solidity all rolled into one. A father any girl should be proud of. But he did not even come near to her. She did not look into his eyes for fear of what she would see” (p.190). The first part of Gwendolen’s description is based on wish-fulfilment, an attempt to fill the vacuum of
her own needs, as she imagines her father as someone she can rely on, couched in an image resonant of the English countryside, surely one from which she would be estranged living in the urban sprawl of London. Whether this is a poor choice of language by the author or whether the narrator is intimating that Gwendolen’s idealised vision of her father is far removed from reality, or both, is not clear. She knows instinctively however that no solace awaits her in her father’s eyes, which is why she averts her gaze. Moreover, it is significant that her father does not speak to her once. His guilt is reflected in a total breakdown in communication.

Sonia’s unvoiced suspicions of her husband are uppermost in her mind when she hears the news of Winston’s death in a gas explosion. According to his friend, Mr Ilochina, Winston had insisted on testing the gas himself even though he was aware of the dangers, as if he had wanted to die. The suggestion is that Winston has committed suicide through the guilt he feels as a result of his treatment of his daughter. His wife, who has failed to voice her suspicions when he was alive, can no longer avoid the truth when she finally visits Gwendolen and her new baby daughter, who is the image of Winston. After making her peace with her daughter, accompanied by her Nigerian friend, Mrs Odowis, she walks home. Unable any longer to repress her rage, she draws a knife from her bag and plunges it repeatedly into a bag of refuse. The knife with which Sonia had taken with her to attack her daughter is instead used to ritually reenact her husband’s death.

It is clear from the above discussion that Emecheta has included many of the points made in theoretical works on incest, such as family dysfunction and issues of consent, as well as questions of blame and guilt. In such works, family dysfunction primarily concerns the conduct of the mother, rather than that of the father, a mother who may be emotionally cold towards her daughter or physically absent from the family. As the authors of one study on incest have stated, “In the clinical literature [...] the theme of maternal absence is emphasized almost to the exclusion of anything else.” In such cases the eldest daughter is relied upon for housework, child care and emotional support. According to these same authors: “For the daughter, the duty to fulfill her father’s sexual demands may evolve almost as an extension of her role as ‘little mother’ in the family.” This is precisely what happens in Emecheta’s novel to the point that the roles
of Gwendolen and Sonia are reversed. As Gwendolen takes on her mother’s role, Sonia is cosseted and treated like a child in Granville after suffering a nervous breakdown. While there she “did not have to worry about her meals, her family’s meals, their washing, their bed-making and the children’s bed-wetting” (p.134). It could be argued though that even before Sonia’s physical absence, there is an emotional void in her relationship with her daughter, and her rather selfish attitude towards Gwendolen is contrasted to her good friend and neighbour, the Nigerian Mrs Odowis, who is a strong and capable mother. In this depiction therefore Emecheta is furthering the process whereby women are often considered blameworthy when incestuous sexual relations develop.39

Although Emecheta upholds much of the sociological data concerning incest on a fictional level, she does break from such sources in depicting a protagonist who has successfully overcome such an ordeal. By the novel’s end Gwendolen seems to have accepted the tragedy of her young life and willingly accepts her child. She welcomes her mother back into her life, and is taught to read by Emmanuel, who remains a good friend. She appears to be living an independent and fulfilled life to the extent that one critic comments that “[t]he novel ends perhaps too optimistically for an incest victim.”40 Although it is true that Gwendolen does show a remarkable resilience, one assumes that Emecheta wishes to combat the negativity of the sexually abused child condemned to victimhood. Another commentator feels that: “The image of Gwendolen as a single, liberated, self-sufficient, healthy mother is too pat and at odds with the profoundly disturbing image of the fatherless black child or the commonplace wandering madwoman.”41 This criticism of Emecheta’s positioning of her heroine seems overstated, for she in no way presents the arrival of Gwendolen’s baby in this manner. Gwendolen’s baby may be fatherless but it is intimated in the novel that Emmanuel will act as a father figure, while the baby is certainly the source of Gwendolen’s sense of achievement. Nor is there any image of a “wandering madwoman” in the novel. Although, admittedly, Gwendolen runs away from home and does indeed wander aimlessly for a day until she seeks a night’s sleep on a park bench, such a description seems unjustified. Even though she is sent to a home for the mentally sick, it is clear that her mental health is never in jeopardy and while there she is treated in a warm and friendly manner and, more importantly, she is given some freedom of choice in
controlling her destiny as already discussed. Finally, one might also query the suggestion that the image of a “wandering madwoman” is commonplace. This remark is then not further contextualised. Is Ogunyemi referring to fictionalised accounts and, if so, from what region? Certainly not in the African and Caribbean literatures in which traditions this novel is based. If one were to criticise Emecheta’s lack of *vraisemblance* in this novel, what strikes me as even more exaggerated, and which has not been raised by such commentators is the melodramatic way in which Winston meets his death, thereby avoiding issues of confrontation and reconciliation with his wife and daughter.

There is some clinical support for Emecheta’s optimistic vision of a survivor of incest. In a work which includes biographical accounts of women sexually abused as young children, the authors comment that these women “do not present themselves as the doomed ‘victims’ that one is accustomed to see in the traditional incest literature; instead, they speak for the resilience and creativity that all of us can share in overcoming the cruelty of sexual abuse.” Unlike the protagonist in Toni Morrison’s novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, who descends into madness after being sexually assaulted by her father, Gwendolen does not become mad, but instead thrives in a “home for the mentally sick” where she is “mothered” by Ama, the Ghanaian nurse.

Just as we saw in Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning* how the process of naming reflects the ambiguity in the mother/daughter relationship, so too does this same process suggest the fractured relationships in Emecheta’s novel, as well as Gwendolen’s very fragile identity. The novel opens with the words: “She was christened Gwendolen. But her Mommy could not pronounce it, neither could her Daddy or his people”(p.9). One critic on this novel suggests that

a palpable symptom of Gwendolen’s entrapment within the patriarchal culture that legitimizes her rape is the parental gift of grand deception embodied in her name. The text opens with the lie that all but erases Gwendolen’s identity, rendering her an easy target of patriarchal reconstruction.

This comment appears to be somewhat flawed. Nowhere in the novel is it suggested that Gwendolen’s rape is “legitimated” or in any way excused, although as I have suggested, her plight does not always receive full and compassionate understanding. Moreover, this “patriarchal culture” is not so applicable to the Jamaican situation which
might be more appropriately considered "matriarchal," although the author may be referring to the situation in England. Certainly, Gwendolen is seen in a position of weakness, but this is principally because of the powerlessness of a child before an adult rather than oppressive male/female relationships. Nevertheless, I agree with this critic that the process of naming draws attention to Gwendolen's fractured identity and it most certainly suggests cultural alienation.

Ironically, in England, the name of Gwendolen is equally reflective of alienation because it is the one recognised by officialdom, both by the air-hostess and by the school, and therefore one which Gwendolen must come to terms with. However, she and her family still have difficulty in its pronunciation, her mother introducing her to the landlord as "Grandalee," which he also then mispronounces. It is evident that Gwendolen's already fragile sense of identity must seem even more precarious to her as a result of the confusion surrounding her name. This is reflected by her strong desire to make sure that her daughter will not suffer the same fate: "One thing she was sure of, her daughter was not going to be given a foreign name which she could not pronounce" (pp.209-10). She asks the Ghanaian nurse for help in choosing her baby's name, one which would encapsulate the idea that the child was her friend, her mother, her sister and her hope. The nurse suggests the Yoruba name "Iyamide," which means all these things and, additionally, "anything-nice-you-can-think-of-in-a-woman's-form" (p.210). What pleases Gwendolen the most is that she finds her daughter's name easy to pronounce, although ironically it is a "foreign" Nigerian name and both Gwendolen and her family have difficulty in pronouncing such names. It may be that with the choice of this name the narrator is suggesting some kind of a diasporan reconnection, especially in view of the fact that both Sonia and Winston have close relationships with African friends, Sonia with Mrs Odowis and Winston with Mr Ilochina. Additionally, Emecheta has dedicated her novel "To that woman in the Diaspora who refused to sever her umbilical cord with Africa." It is noticeable that the nurse rejects the idea that Gwendolen name her daughter after her father. The father/daughter bond is not to be perpetuated in the act of naming.

Emecheta's decision to set The Family in Jamaica, then in England, and to choose West Indian protagonists raises interesting questions. Is Emecheta's distancing herself from
her usual choice of Nigerian characters an attempt to avoid criticism from her Nigerian compatriots if she were to discuss incest in the context of African society? There are several other markers in the text which suggest that Emecheta’s decision is not coincidental. For example, the narrator frames the incest story into a larger historical dimension of diasporan relationships. Winston attempts to discover if such incestuous desires are manifest in other cultures when, learning about the practice of polygamy in African societies, he asks his Nigerian friend, Azu Ilochina, whether Nigerian men ever marry their daughters. His friend quickly comprehends the significance of this question and is appalled. However he intimates that Winston is the victim of circumstances beyond his control when he asks himself “What had slavery done to a nice brother like this?” (p.143). In this way Mr Ilochina intimates that incest is not a natural occurrence in African societies but has been introduced into diasporan communities by the havoc wrought on familial relationships by slavery. He further dismisses the possibility of incest in African societies with an economic argument when he tells Winston that “A daughter belonged to the father, her bride price was his. If the daughter was chaste, it would enhance her father’s position and make him richer. So why should a father wish to ruin his own wealth?” (pp.142-43). To further illustrate the incest taboo, he recalls a story told him by his mother about a man who had committed incest with his daughter and who was beaten into a pulp by the women from his village. Such a man is considered as sinning against the Earth and “If he is not discovered, he will surely be killed by an Earth force like thunder, you know, natural electricity, drowning, just an Earth force” (p.144). Although, with this tale of incest Mr Ilochina is contradicting himself, for it does relate an actual incident of incest in African society which he claims does not occur, nevertheless, it is intimated that it is an isolated incident, and in fact the tale takes on the dimension of an oral myth told for purposes of moral edification.

To further explore the possibilities surrounding Emecheta’s decision to distance herself somewhat from African culture in this novel, it is noticeable that when Gwendolen chooses a name for her child she chooses a Nigerian name. Although her reasons are both pragmatic (a name that she can at least pronounce) and symbolic (she aspires to a close relationship with her daughter and hopes she may yet find solace in her relationship with her mother), nevertheless this decision has further ramifications. By adopting the name suggested by the Ghanaian nurse and agreeing with the nurse’s
advice not to name the child after her father, it is as if Gwendolen is adopted into a world of matriarchal values. In choosing her daughter’s name, Gwendolen is stressing the importance of the mother/daughter relationship and distancing herself from the paternal line which has so nearly destroyed her. In adopting an African name Gwendolen is also rejecting the world of diasporic alienation in which she has grown up. This is further emphasised when, confronted by the social worker regarding his daughter’s pregnancy, Winston is sure Gwendolen will not betray him by telling about the incest, that she will be unable to confide in a mother because that “closeness between African mother and daughter had been lost during the slave passage”(p.170). The reasoning behind this is difficult to follow, for although slavery certainly separated men from their families, it was normal for mothers and children to remain together. Whatever the intention, what appears to be suggested is that Gwendolen and her family’s problems are due to historical factors. The many contradictions inherent in the text and the displacements regarding incest utilised by Emecheta in *The Family* are indicative of her ambivalence towards this subject.

**The Poetics of Survival: Yvonne Vera’s *Under the Tongue***

Emecheta’s treatment of incest in *The Family* in its “realist” mode is vastly different from Yvonne Vera’s more poetic, atemporal treatment of the same subject in her novel, *Under the Tongue*. Another difference is Vera’s unashamedly using as the setting for her tale of incest her own country, Zimbabwe. It may also be that with her constant evocation of the War of Independence, she parallels the importance of a child’s right to protection and respect and a nation’s right to autonomy and dignity. The narrative concentrates primarily on three generations of women, a grandmother, her daughter, Runyararo and her granddaughter, Zhizha. The poetic nature of the work which encompasses the nature of womanhood is in sharp contrast to its subject, father/daughter incest. The opening pages of the novel initiate the reader into the close grandmother/granddaughter relationship and the sexual abuse of Zhizha by her father, Muroyiwa, when Zhizha tells of her father’s visits to her bed during the night. The narrator describes how, at this time, she bites hard onto her tongue, and her voice sinks
through her body until it "hides beneath rock" (p. 3). Unable to verbally reject her father's embrace, Zhizha is forced to keep her feelings of outrage hidden, repressed.

The narrative trajectory of *Under the Tongue* is unusual. As the daughter/narrator imparts her story which is redolent of what may be termed "mythical moments," so too is there a parallel story of her father's growth into manhood, but the daughter's narrative takes precedence over the father's in the narrative space allotted to it. Zhizha's mythical narration includes tales of rivers, both inside and outside her body and roots which grow from both her and her grandmother's body. Sometimes she imagines that she is her grandmother, sometimes her mother, so that there is a constant merging of bodies. Many important events in the narrative are included in dreams, for example that of her father's death. This dream takes the form of shadows, of the sea, and of her grandmother's words of comfort, that she need not worry for her father was dead, having "drunk the forbidden water from the sea, swallowed the deep unknown things of [his daughter's] growing" (pp. 4-5).

Interspersed with such descriptions is a parallel description of her father's birth and growth into a young man. Muroyiwa has been told by his mother that he was born in a calabash. He appeared stillborn but the following morning it was found that he was still alive. Perhaps the fact that he had been put into a calabash ready for burial explains the meaning of his mother's words, as he undergoes a kind of rebirth. Evidently the details of his birth upset him and he seems to have interiorised feelings of being unwanted. It is perhaps for his reason that he "carried a calabash inside him, where his heart should have been" (p. 7). Additionally, there is another tragedy in this family for Muroyiwa's father, VaGomba, is blind. He has not always been so, but preparing some fields for planting, he hits a root which springs from the earth and hits him across his eyes, causing his blindness. While roots are signs of interconnectedness in Zhizha's maternal family, in her paternal family they are thus carriers of tragedy. Indeed, the narrator of *Under the Tongue* appears to contrast the difficulties of Muroyiwa's birth and his sense of being unwanted by his community with the life-affirming birth process of Zhizha into the midst of her family: "We seek our peace from the beginning of our being, from the mouth of rivers, from mothers. A daughter is the birth of dream, a daughter is daylight on growing leaves. Daughters are our mothers, Grandmother says" (p. 11). Whereas
nature is shown to be beneficent in the maternal family, it strikes out at VaGomba. The
closeness between mother and daughter is compared with the nightmare and absence
existing between father and daughter. When Zhizha recalls how her mother helped her
learn the alphabet, they share an intimacy which is such that it is described as a merging
of identities: “I remember all my letters. I tell my mother and she repeats after me and I
laugh then I repeat after mother who repeats after me and I after her... I have turned into
mother, and she laughs because she has become me. The letters flow from me to my
mother”(p.82). The almost total lack of punctuation in this citation emphasises the
spontaneous nature of the mother/daughter relationship. Unlike the open communication
between mother and daughter, there is little interaction between Muroyiwa and his
father: “No instructions given, no expectations raised. VaGomba had no wisdoms to
impart”(p.36). Unlike the previous citation, in the first-person, the first sentence of the
subsequent citation is in the passive tense, suggesting anonymity and distance and the
three negative constructions point to the negativity in the father-son relationship.

Another important event which is intimated rather than explicitly described is
Runyararo’s murder of her husband. It is again incorporated in one of Zhizha’s dreams.
She simply recounts the names of her parents and alludes to the sound of a knife moving
over rock. Zhizha’s grandfather also refers to the murder: “Thunder breaks
grandfather’s voice apart, and I hear words drop slowly where he stands...dead...he
says...police...he says...Runyararo”(p.42). When Runyararo confides in her mother what
Muroyiwa has done to their daughter, she attempts to stress the unnaturalness of his
actions by contrasting them to the natural world, asking whether “the sun forget[s] its
direction which it has known for many years, turning, in mid-noon, to go back and set
where it began at dawn?”(p.31) Runyararo’s distress at both her own despair and the
plight of her daughter is apparent in her words: “He has filled my mouth with decay,
turning the tomorrow of my child into death, burying her, in the middle of the
night”(p.31). The imagery of death contained within this citation underlines
Runyararo’s belief that Muroyiwa’s actions have not only destroyed her child at this
point in time, but have also affected any future generations she may conceive. The
shame he has brought upon the family has turned his ancestors “into insects, carrying
everyone, the born and the unborn, in a wave of shame”(p.31).
Unlike the atemporal, oneiric quality of most of the writing, parts of the several pages of narrative which describe the father/daughter incest contain a brutal realism, but tempered with an incantatory dreamlike quality. In fact, as these pages are placed directly after Runyaro’s release from prison where she has been confined for the murder of her husband, Zhizha must in fact be dreaming of these events. The fact that that these acts of incest are being replayed in Zhizha’s mind underlines their lasting effect upon her. One example will suffice:

   Father falls on my legs parted, spread on the cold floor. / He whispers, sings about a handful of sand gathered on the bank of rivers. / I cry for mercy, but my cry is silence. Mother, I cry in my sleep. A throbbing hard and horrid passes between my legs, searing, tearing. A wound fresh with blood grows into my chest. (p.105)

This quotation is a blending of literal description, as in the first sentence, with metaphoric allusion. The second sentence is somewhat obscure for one would normally expect the word “bank” to be in the plural. In the singular form it seems to transform the meaning from “river banks” to an image of rivers being formed into some kind of a dam, a kind of an impasse or physical barrier which serves to heighten the protagonist’s entrapment. In the following sentence the protagonist attempts to cry out for “mercy,” not help. It is as if she already knows that help is not at hand. She attempts to cry out but is unsuccessful, something which occurs frequently in dreams, but this may also reflect the reality of her attempted cries for help during past acts of rape, when her father may have prevented her from doing so. In the description of the actual rape the instrument of penetration is not named, again a distancing tactic on the part of the narrator; it is a “throbbing,” which suggests a steadily increasing violence of movement as well as connotations of pleasure. The qualifying alliterative “hard and horrid” dispels any notion of such pleasure and stresses the horrific nature of the crime committed, as do the violence of the verbs “searing” and “tearing” which describe the child’s body’s vulnerability to such a physical onslaught. The “wound” which is “fresh with blood” grows into the child’s chest. Surely this is not a physical wound in this instance but an emotional and spiritual wounding of the heart. However, the allusion to blood underlines the physical as well as emotional violence perpetrated.

Vera’s novel recounts not only the child’s attempts to survive the ordeal of incest, but also that of her immediate family. Although part of the narration is focused through the
father, he never alludes to the subject of incest and therefore the reader is not privy to any possible motivation nor whether he feels any subsequent remorse. Certainly the narrative stance enables the reader to focus on the daughter’s perspective on this taboo subject. The novel’s opening words, “A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock” (p. 1), stresses the necessity of speaking out, however painful it might be. The difficulty of doing so is encapsulated in the image of a tongue being buried beneath a rock, unlikely ever to be released. However, despite this, it is certain that the child does speak out in this novel and that she is heard by both her mother and her grandmother. Nevertheless, at the same time that the importance of speaking out is stressed, it is also implied that, in the words of Zhizha’s grandmother: “[I]t is sometimes good to forget, to bury the heavy things which cannot be remembered without death becoming better than life” (p. 10). Zhizha’s grandmother seems to suggest with these words that if memories are too painful and unbearable, there is sometimes no choice but to repress them in order to be able to survive. Perhaps these opposing truths help explain Vera’s treatment of incest in *Under the Tongue*, which is circumlocutory and suggestive rather than overtly explicit. This approach is encapsulated in the following words spoken by the narrator, referring to her grandmother: “Grandmother says that a woman cannot point to the source of her pain, saying, it is here and there. A woman finds her sorrow in her dream and everywhere. She is wounded even in her awakening.” (p. 40).

In the final pages of the novel, when describing the ceasefire after Zimbabwe’s war of liberation from her colonial oppressors, the omniscient narrator juxtaposes the joyful return of the men and women who have fought in the mountains to Runyararo’s return home “from another direction altogether during this ceasefire, released, able to see her daughter again” (p. 102). The word “released” intimates that Runyararo’s return is from jail and a prison sentence, but it also intimates the relief she must feel in rejoining her daughter without fear for the latter’s safety. In a specific reference to women freedom fighters who had killed “farm dogs, white men and grasshoppers” (p. 101), perhaps the narrator is suggesting that Runyararo has also had to fight a battle but on an individual level. Unlike the battle fought by the freedom fighters which is motivated by political ideals, Runyararo’s battle is also a fight to the death, but motivated by a personal desire to protect her daughter.
Just before the description of the ceasefire, signalling the end of the war in 1980, the description of Zhizha’s dreams of her father’s sexual abuse end with the words “A word does not rot unless it is carried in the mouth for too long, under the tongue”(p.110). These words with their connotation of speaking out point to a hope in the future, and the narrator appears to compare such optimism to the feelings experienced by the survivors of the war in the final pages. The narrator points to the hopefulness of the populace, especially the women who have missed their men and for whom “1980 was a time to shorten distances to desire”(p.112). Even those who remain “unconvinced,” perhaps of the necessity of a hope in a better future, “found it necessary to open their windows an inch wider,” to let themselves believe that, however poor they might be it was “necessary to search their pockets for an extra coin that would purchase opportunity, if nothing else”(p.113). In continually juxtaposing and linking the suffering of an individual family with the fate of a nation, the narrator of Under the Tongue points to a guarded optimism in the possibility of a better life ahead, if only one has the courage to survive, both at a personal and at a national level.

Uncovering Incest: Evelyne Mpoudi Ngolle’s Sous la cendre le feu

The Cameroonian writer, Mpoudi Ngolle’s novel Sous la cendre le feu is set in Douala, in Southern Cameroon and focuses on a family’s attempts to come to terms with a man’s rape of his stepdaughter. The narrative is told from the perspective of the wife, Mina, a 30-year-old, well-educated and reasonably affluent young woman, who is attempting to dislodge from her subconscious her knowledge of this event. When her husband Djibril and her daughter Fanny, visit her in hospital and the latter asks her mother if it is true that she is mad, the narrator is forced to confront the nature of her illness. Her psychiatrist, a Dr Lobe, assures her that once she recovers her memory she will recover from her depressed state. As Mina delves back into her past the reader learns how, after a fleeting romance during the last year of high school, she becomes pregnant by a medical student, Joel, who refuses to acknowledge any responsibility. Immediately afterwards she meets Djibril, who is about ten years older than her and working as a lawyer. They fall in love and decide to marry whereupon he vows to recognise her
unborn child as his own. The child, Fanny, is followed by three more children, but later Mina discovers that Djibril has raped Fanny while she was visiting him after school in his office. Unable to cope with what Fanny tells her, she collapses and is sent to recover in hospital.

The two father/daughter relationships in this novel, that between Mina, the narrator, and her father and that between Mina’s daughter, Fanny, and her stepfather, Djibril, are close and loving, but both are linked to traumatic events following an illicit sexual relationship. It is in confiding to her psychiatrist childhood memories that Mina is able to uncover not only incidents concerning her father but also those from her recent past which affect her husband and her daughter, both of which Mina regards as acts of personal betrayal. In fact, the recounting of Mina’s memories to her psychiatrist forms most of the narrative, occasionally interrupted by visits from her husband and her children. Dr Lobé himself plays the role of a father figure. He is someone Mina trusts absolutely and in whom she is able to confide without reservation.

Mina’s relationship with her biological father, most of which is told in flashback, is ambiguous. She recounts how he encouraged her in her studies, an unusual attitude in their community, most fathers feeling time and expense devoted to a girl’s education futile. Indeed, Mina’s father also holds this view, but he encourages her all the same. Because Mina is a high achiever he wants her to go as far as possible, even though he professes that “ses diplômes ne lui serviront à rien” (p.15) [her diplomas won’t be of any use to her]. Mina also feels victimised as a female when she discovers that her father is building a house with his two brothers, one large enough to house all the family during the holidays. However, when they are calculating the number of bedrooms needed, the girls in the family, Mina and her cousin, are not included. When Mina asks why, she is told that her first consideration should be marriage and that, only a generation earlier, her uncles would have relied on the money obtained from her bride price for the construction of the house. Both girls are the subject of much teasing concerning this matter which Mina, who is fifteen years old at the time, believes is in bad taste. She realises from that moment that: “la femme n’était et ne serait jamais chez elle nulle part: chez ses parents, elle est une passante. Chez son mari, elle est susceptible d’être mise à la porte au gré du mari ou même de sa belle-famille” (p.16) [a woman did not have and
never would have a place she could call her own: in her parents’ home she is only passing through. In her husband’s home she is likely to be shown the door at the whim of her husband or even that of her family-in-law. Such an acknowledgement induces Mina to become resigned to suffer her fate, an attitude that may account for her inability to cope when faced with her husband’s incestuous actions.

Both father/daughter relationships involve the betrayal of a child. Mina feels personally betrayed when she discovers that her father is having an affair. As a child, Mina had looked upon him in the same way that she looked upon the Christian God, the “father of the church,” as someone who was infallible. Such an idealised image is finally shattered when she witnesses a domestic row involving her father, his lover and her mother. Her father is just about to sit down and eat the food prepared by his mistress when his wife discovers the domestic idyll and, in a fit of jealousy, pulls the tablecloth from the table causing the food to scatter everywhere. Not only is Mina ashamed of her mother’s lack of dignity but she feels totally betrayed by her father: “cette révélation, sans réhabiliter ma mère à mes yeux, avait détruit mon père-dieu” (p.88) [this revelation, without causing me to think any better of my mother, had destroyed my god-like father]. The shock of this disclosure causes Mina to suffer from a crippling fear expressing itself physiologically in stomach cramps and headaches. She also loses weight but no ailment is discovered, although the doctor believes it may be due to impending puberty. Mina never confronts her father or even confides in him her insecurities, and this may be why she is never able to deal with this upset and why she continues to suffer its mental and physical effects into adulthood. Mina’s illness is therefore linked to sexual undercurrents, not only caused by discovering the reason for her parents’ marital problems, but by the onset of puberty and her own awakening sexuality.

In the case of the other father/daughter relationship depicted, it is Mina’s child Fanny who is betrayed, although Mina is also deceived by her husband. Mina’s illness, recurring periodically at moments of stress, returns when Fanny tells her that she has been raped by her stepfather while still only twelve years old. Mina collapses at this time and is taken to hospital. As she realises later, unable to cope with what her daughter was telling her, she “l’avait [t] enfoui au plus profond [d’elle]-même, pour ne jamais le révéler à personne, [elle] l’y avait [t] tellement enfermé que [s]a propre
Mina further diminishes the seriousness of Djibril’s conduct towards their daughter in blaming herself for Fanny’s distress, believing her inability to deal with her daughter’s disclosure has been the primary cause of Fanny’s suffering, rather than the sexual attack itself. Mina is not even sure that Fanny resents her father’s conduct, that she might have accepted it “avec un naturel identique à celui qui entourerait n’importe quelle autre marque d’affection entre un père et sa fille” (p.200) [quite naturally as one associated with no matter what other token of affection between a father and his daughter] if she had not reacted so dramatically. Mina seems to be intent, once again, on deceiving herself, for it was she who has noticed a change in Fanny’s conduct after her father’s sexual abuse. Even before she admits to the doctor, or to herself, Djibril’s actions, she has perceived Fanny to be silent and self-absorbed. To her mother’s questioning Fanny has replied either that she is tired or that she has a headache. It is clear that Mina’s reaction to her daughter’s confidences and her subsequent breakdown would add to Mina’s troubles, but it seems logical to deduce that Fanny’s trauma is the result of her rape rather than her mother’s reaction to it.

Mina does however realise that she must discover why Djibril has betrayed their daughter’s trust for she is sure that Djibril loves Fanny: “Il a élevé plus encore que moi
cette fillette, qui était sa joie. [...] Qu'a-t-il bien pu se produire pour que Djibril ait oublié que Fanny était sa fille?"(p.199) [He had shouldered more of the responsibility than I in raising this young daughter who was his pride and joy. [...] What could have happened to cause Djibril to forget that Fanny was his daughter?] The explanation is given at a family conference when Djibril explains how one of his friends persuaded him to see a féticheur in order to try and make his business more profitable. The féticheur had promised Djibril that he would become very rich if he agreed to fulfil certain requirements, one of which was to hand over a sum of money to the féticheur and another, to sleep with a pre-pubescent girl from his family. Mina is very disturbed that her husband could think of doing such a thing for money and Djibril reassures her that he had tried to withdraw from the agreement and he had only failed to do so because he had been visited that same day by Fanny’s biological father, Joel, who wished to claim his daughter. Djibril assures Mina that he would never have perpetrated such an act against Fanny if Joel had not arrived and threatened to take his wife and daughter away from him. According to Djibril it was this visit that “a ouvert dans [s]a tête la breche par laquelle l’idée démoniaque s’est infiltrée ensuite”(p.204) [caused his mind to be open to the demonic idea which then took hold of him].

At this point in the narrative, the reader’s response may, like Mina’s, be one of disbelief as Djibril’s excuses for his conduct seem to lack any sort of logic. If, as he states, he only decided to follow through with the féticheur’s instructions because of Joel’s threats, surely his actions would only serve to underline his unsuitability as a surrogate father. A more moral and circumspect attitude towards his daughter would have ensured that no reproach could be levelled against him. Mina’s response to Djibril’s excuses is to pity him despite herself. She also remembers her gratitude towards him twelve years previously when she was pregnant and in the depths of despair. In addition, she is determined that Fanny’s biological father should not destroy her family. Mina’s reasoning also seems to lack logic in this instance. She forgets that Djibril did not marry her out of pity but because he was in love with her. Furthermore, although she might justly resent Joel’s reappearance in her life at this time and his ludicrous demands, nevertheless she forgets that it is Djibril’s conduct which has threatened to destroy their family, not Joel’s.
There are two competing discourses, traditional and Western, suggested in *Sous la cendre le feu* as to how to best resolve the family’s problems and reintegrate Djibril back into the family, Mina believing that Fanny would suffer more should she decide to divorce Djibril. In order to try and free Djibril from the spell he is under, his uncle suggests visiting a Marabout but Mina’s parents, as practising Christians, vigorously reject this proposition and instead insist on the ministrations of their priest. In this case, it is the Western religion which gains the upper hand, the entire family visiting the village of Mina’s parents and their family priest where they all pray together. The novel then ends with the following description:

Dehors, les tam-tams déchaînés roulaient déjà dans un rythme endiable; mes enfants perdus au milieu des autres enfants du village, regardaient, émerveillés, les danseurs et les batteurs de tam-tam, tous ces signes d’un monde qui leur était inconnu, et qu’ils semblaient regretter de ne pas connaître. Fanny, en nous voyant arriver, courut se placer entre Djibril et moi, et, nous prenant chacun par la main, nous entraîna vers le cercle formé par les danseurs. (p.207)

[Outside the wild drums were beating to a furious rhythm; my children, lost in the midst of the other village children, were looking, filled with wonder, at the dancers and the drum beaters, all those signs of a world unknown to them and which they seemed sorry not to know. Fanny, seeing us arrive, ran and placed herself between Djibril and I, and, holding both our hands, led us towards the circle formed by the dancers.]

The above scene appears rather clichéd for several reasons. Above all, perhaps, because it presents the obligatory “happy ending” even though such a prospect seems highly unlikely given the events depicted. Additionally, there is an intimation that if only, as a family, they could return to their cultural origins, everything else would fall into place. Certainly, Mina’s and Djibril’s children seem totally at ease in the communal gathering, in fact they are “lost in the midst of the other village children” (p.207), lost, because indistinguishable from them, suggesting total reintegration. Even Fanny is no longer morose and suspicious, but makes a gesture of reconciliation to her parents as all the villagers form a harmonious circle. Not only is the ending of the novel unlikely given Fanny’s earlier distress, it is highly romanticised.

The presence of two parallel discourses in the novel, traditional and Western, are thus adhered to in varying degrees by the different protagonists although the above scene, with the priest’s ministrations and the traditional dance seem to betoken a certain successful syncreticism. However, the author has previously suggested that Mina and
Djibril, who have received a Western-type education, do not subscribe to tradition. In their search for a “cure” for Mina’s “madness,” traditional remedies in the form of a visit to a traditional healer are rejected by them, Mina referring to such practices as “obscurantistes” (p.90) [reactionary]. Mina’s parents are convinced that Djibril’s relatives must have put a spell on Mina and therefore believe that “Western” medicine would be ineffectual. However, the narrator has previously stated that, as practising Christians, Mina’s parents reject a visit to the healer in the case of Djibril’s misconduct. Additionally, Djibril himself describes a visit to a féticheur, yet purportedly does not subscribe to such practices. Such a lack of consistency in character motivation produces less than credible protagonists.

Of interest in this novel, however, is the way Mpoudi Ngolle explores the question of the applicability of Western psychiatric medicine in the treatment of her African protagonists. As noted in discussing Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions, such a possibility is dismissed by the Western psychiatrists approached by Nyasha’s parents. That particular novel is set in the 1960s, whereas Sous la cendre le feu appears to be set in 1980s Cameroon. Evidently, allowing for variation in country, the depiction of psychiatric medicine has radically altered. Mina’s psychiatrist is African, not European and she is in a well-equipped, modern, neuro-psychological hospital where Freudian ideas are deemed to be applicable to African patients. Mina herself raises this issue with her doctor, remarking that she thought that concepts such as the subconscious were “des histoires de Blancs, et que les Noirs n’avaient rien à voir avec toutes ces complications psychologiques” (p.91) [a story made up by white people and which did not concern black people with all its psychological complications]. Mina also insists that something like the oedipus complex would be unthinkable in an African context, but Dr Lobé responds with his belief that there is no fundamental difference between people because of their race, although socio-cultural factors are influential. In a traditional context a child who is looked after by many people makes it less likely that he or she would have the possibility, or even the need, to become fixated on one parent, yet he believes that modern society is changing so quickly, with the family module becoming more and more westernised, that there is no longer a great difference between these cultures.
As if to elaborate on the ways in which the socio-cultural environment is influential in family relationships, Mpoudi Ngolle presents a “modern” family which has obviously undergone quite a strong Western influence, particularly in the education of its two principal protagonists, Mina and Djibil. Mina, although a housewife and mother, wants to improve her educational qualifications and spends long periods of time away from her family in order to do so when Djibiril becomes the primary child carer. He shows less willingness to undertake domestic and child rearing tasks, however, under increasing disapproval from both spouses’ families and the influence of his business colleagues. Is Mpoudi Ngolle suggesting that such practices of child rearing are more likely to lead to incestuous desires on the part of the father towards his daughter? Certainly Djibril is uncomfortable that Fanny has no compunction about being in a state of undress in his presence and he asks Mina to talk to their daughter about this. Conversely, however, the motivation for incest presented in the novel is not sexual but purportedly financial initially, and then as a means of a desperate attempt by a father to stake a claim of “ownership” of his daughter, an act lacking in any logic, due to the taboo nature of incest.

Although incest is obviously central to the plot of Sous la cendre le feu, it is not well integrated into the novel’s structure either in relation to plot or characterisation, possibly as a result of the author’s discomfort with the subject. Certainly the way in which Mpoudi Ngolle delineates the problems of mental illness and incest may be an attempt to depict the hybridity inherent in the sociological structures of a rapidly changing post-colonial society. What is less credible is the way in which she attempts to render the treatment of incest in an African context more realistic by introducing a cultural African authenticity to it, yet instead exoticises it, perhaps with the Western reader in mind, with the introduction of the whole episode of the féticheur. Although such events are not beyond the realms of possibility, this aspect of the novel lacks feasibility and appears contrived. Accordingly it might be claimed that the author’s treatment of such a serious matter as that of incest tends to trivialise it rather than contribute anything meaningful to the debate.

Although in both father/daughter relationships the daughter is betrayed by the father, in the first relationship to be depicted, it is Mina’s mother who suffers the primary betrayal.
due to her husband’s infidelity. She is however prepared to forgive her husband, making it clear that what upsets her most is that he has chosen her best friend with whom to have an affair. Mina, the daughter, who also feels betrayed, could be said to have unrealistic expectations when she compares her father to “God the father,” but perhaps the pertinent question here is: why does she have such an idealised vision of her father in the first place? In a novel which is structured around the concept of the repression of Mina’s subconscious, Mina’s obsession regarding her father may be a manifestation of the Electra complex. In less psychoanalytical terms, her idealised vision of her father may stem from the inequitable nature of male/female relations in her society that she is made aware of as a young girl. In the second father/daughter relationship, Mina herself is betrayed by her husband, in the first instance in the attempted rape of her sister and finally, in the rape of her daughter. Just as Mina’s mother has done before her, Mina makes excuses for her husband when she takes his side against her sister and, in the incest on her daughter, she makes allowances for him. The reasons for such indulgence towards their respective husbands are present in the sub-text which suggests that a woman has little choice in the patriarchal society into which she has been born.

Indeed, it is evident that Mina is made aware of the inequitable nature of gender relations in her society by her encounter with several authoritative “father” figures. She rejects the option of an abortion as an unmarried pregnant woman, citing the judgemental attitude of her local priest, completely lacking in charity towards a young woman parishioner who died while undergoing an abortion. Another possibility is for Mina to take advantage of a presidential decree obliging any young man who is responsible for making a minor pregnant, to marry her. If the young man refuses, he is sent to jail for six years. Mina also rejects this solution, likening such forced marriages to “deux jeunes gens qu’on traînait devant le maire comme des bœufs à l’abattoir”(p.40) [two young people being dragged in front of the mayor like cattle to the slaughter]. Such an authoritarian presidential edict points to a paternalistic attitude towards young women, who are assumed to be incapable of coping with such problems. It seems that neither the Catholic priest, in his position of “father of the community” nor the President, in his position as “father of the nation,” is able to provide Mina with the resolution of her dilemma. When Mina meets Djibril she feels that all her problems are
solved. The meeting of the two young people is described in terms of a coup de foudre. The unlikely nature of their romance, combined with the difference in their ages, does not augur well for a reciprocal adult relationship, but rather suggests yet another unsatisfactory paternal relationship.

Subverting Romance Fiction: Marie-Gisèle Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour*

Another francophone novel, Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour*, is useful to explore with regard to the father/daughter relationship especially in its points of comparison with *Sous la cendre le feu*. Set in the Ivory Coast, it concerns a young woman’s attempts to come to terms with her incestuous passion for her father and her subsequent murder of him. The Favier family consists of the mother and father and four children, two older boys and two younger girls, Johanne and Muriel. The family is extremely affluent: the father owns several lucrative businesses and his wife is employed as a university lecturer. Eric Favier’s father was a French colon who had married into one of the select families of the Ivory Coast. With the mention of Eric Favier’s forbears, then, the notion of colonialism is inserted into the novel. It is suggested by the narrator that the Favier family is not popular in the region due to their neighbours’ envy of its wealth. This may also be due to another factor, the unstated distrust of what might be seen as a continuation of a colonialist ideology apparent in Eric Favier’s ownership of an import-export company. Certainly the father effectively creates a boundary between his family and the rest of the neighbourhood reflected in the high walls and imposing gates surrounding his home.\(^{52}\)

A comparison of *Sous la cendre le feu* and *Les Haillons de l’amour* is pertinent for there are similarities in genre, structure, subject matter and tone. Both novels have a structuring device which may be termed a confessional narrative. Just as Mina is confined to a hospital room and divulges her past life to a psychiatrist, so too is the heroine of *Les Haillons de l’amour* incarcerated, but in her case it is in a prison where she is awaiting execution for the murder of her father, and her interlocutor is her priest. Despite the fact that most of the narration concerns the protagonist’s past life, unlike the narration in *Sous la cendre le feu*, it is primarily omniscient, interspersed with first
person narration and indirect free speech. Both novels can be classified as belonging to the “romance” genre where the romantic experience of the heroine is at the novel’s centre and the narrative is primarily concerned with her emotional life. Moreover, the tone of both novels, particularly *Les Haillons de l’amour*, is that of melodrama, present in the plot, with the heroine pining after a forbidden love and especially in its climax, when she murders her father and is condemned to death.

Both novels focus on the period of adolescence as being extremely formative with regard to sexuality, when both heroines are searching for sexual as well as romantic fulfilment. In both novels the romantic yearnings of a young woman are explored but the explicit focus of a reciprocal sexual relationship is avoided. Additionally, the central protagonists, Mina and Johanne, spend a lot of time, money and effort on making themselves look desirable. Indeed, there are many pages of narration in both novels concerning the details of the respective protagonists’ wardrobe, make-up and hair styles. In *Sous la cendre le feu* both Mina and her sister blame the problems in her marriage on Mina’s neglecting to make herself look desirable for her husband. In *Les Haillons de l’amour* Johanne tries to make herself look “sexy” in order to try and tempt her father into leaving his mistress and focus solely on her. Such treatment of sexual relationships, where a woman must play the role of temptress, tends to uphold a certain ideology of women which sees them as objects to be admired rather than as persons in their own right.

The most intriguing feature of *Les Haillons de l’amour* is the fact that the reader is never certain whether the act of incest is committed between father and daughter. This is because the description of such a relationship relies on a narrative approach which is constantly called into question. This is suggested, in the first instance, by the unreliability of the narration and, in the second instance, by the use of narrative point of view, which is focused through Johanne. An example of narrative unreliability is given early in the novel when the whole family goes to Egypt on holiday. One evening the narrator describes Eric Favier and his daughter alone in the hotel garden together where apparently no words are needed to depict the closeness of their relationship: “Seule comptait la fusion de leurs âmes dans le romantisme complice du jardin” (p. 9) [All that mattered was the fusion of their souls in the romantic complicity of the garden].
follows a long description of their romantic moments together, Johanne musing that "on dirait deux amoureux" (p.18) [anyone would think they were two lovers] but although Johanne fantasises about her father kissing her, she is disappointed in her expectation. As Johanne listens to her heart beat in unison with her father's and feels that they are as one, she closes her eyes "pour jouir encore plus du moment et... les rouvrit dans son lit à l'hôtel Méridien peu de temps avant la fin de la nuit" (p.20) [in order to make the moment last a little longer... and reopens them in her bed at the Hotel Meridien just before daylight]. In a technique which is typical of a day-time "soapie," it transpires that the whole garden interlude has been a dream. Johanne certainly does not think she has dreamed all of the above for she wakes her sister just to tell her how happy she is. The father/daughter embrace which she relives at this time she sees as something which "scella une union, celle d'un homme et d'une adolescente de treize ans réunis par un amour profond" (p.20) [sealed a union, that of a man and a thirteen-year-old adolescent united by a profound love]. The holiday over, Johanne and her family return to the Ivory Coast. Johanne is described as immeasurably happy and in terms of "une jeune mariée revenant d'une lune de miel mémorable" (p.21) [a young bride returning from a memorable honeymoon]. However, she also realises that upon their return Eric Favier will once again spend long periods of time away from home and, as she ruminates what her father's absence will mean to her, the reader realises to what extent Johanne is already obsessed with her father, how in the past she has hidden for hours in the library waiting for his return until late into the night. Eric Favier puts Johanne's unhappiness down to her disappointment that her holiday is over. Johanne wonders why her father pretends not to know the reason for her unhappiness. "Peut-être craignait-il de se laisser enchaîner par la passion? Peut-être aussi que pour lui, aimer Johanne en toute liberté avait l'acceptation de vendre son âme au diable?" (p.22) [Perhaps he feared to let himself be carried away by his passion? Perhaps also for him to love Johanne in total freedom would entail selling his soul to the devil?] The reader is no wiser than Johanne regarding the nature of Eric Favier's feelings for his daughter.

The doubts raised as to the true extent of the incestuous nature of the father/daughter relationship are also as a result of the function of narrative point of view. At one point in the novel a "goodnight" ritual between Johanne and her father is described by the narrator. They would sit alone together in the little drawing room when everyone else
had gone to bed, where they were free to “s’enlacer et de se caresser” (p.24) [be close to one another and embrace one another]. Subsequently her father would accompany Johanne to her bedroom where she would undress and climb into bed. Eric Favier would then sit upon the side of her bed and she would take his hand and place it underneath her nightdress onto her stomach. The narrator adds that Eric Favier then “caressait légèrement le ventre nu, comme s’il avait peur de le toucher. Puis il ôtait sa main. Vite. Trop vite au goût de Johanne” (p.24) [would lightly caress her bare stomach, as if he were afraid to touch it. Then he would remove his hand. Quickly. Too quickly for Johanne’s liking]. Although this is a third person narration, the last sentence suggests that it is filtered from Johanne’s point of view. In fact the reader is never privy to Eric Favier’s perception of events. The scene described is sexually the most explicit in the whole novel. Doubt is raised as to its veracity because it is obviously focused through Johanne and the reader has already been misled as to the nature of their relationship through the dream sequence described in the previous paragraph. Additionally, one must wonder whether such conduct would not awaken the suspicions of the rest of the family, in particular Mme Favier. Consequently, if we believe in the veracity of a passionate affair existing between father and daughter, then we must question the implausible nature of the whole narrative.

There is another moment in the text which appears to indicate that Johanne may have misconstrued the special nature of her relationship with her father. This is achieved by dramatic irony, and occurs on the day of Muriel Favier’s first communion when there is a grand celebration at their home. Eric Favier returns home unexpectedly from abroad for his youngest daughter’s special day. As he enters the room Johanne can hardly contain herself as she walks slowly towards her father, savouring the moment of their embrace. The narrator describes her as “une mariée qui va rejoindre l’homme de sa vie” (p.40) [a bride who is going to rejoin the man of her life] and the other guests part to make way for her advance. Her father opens his arms to receive her embrace, and at that precise moment her sister runs past her and throws herself into her father’s arms. Johanne’s agitation increases when she sees Muriel monopolising all her father’s time, and culminates in a physical attack on her sister later that afternoon in the privacy of their room. The pathological nature of Johanne’s emotions is further underlined when she comforts herself with the belief that her father only returned that day because she so
fervently desired it and that "son destin et celui de son père seraient éternellement liés" (p.50) [her father's destiny and her own would be eternally linked].

Johanne's obsession with her father causes her to become ill. She finds it more and more difficult to sleep, suffers from severe migraines, and becomes disorientated, afterwards having no memory of these episodes. One night, unable to sleep, she wanders out of her bedroom and when she sees her father, throws her arms around him in desperation. Eric Favier understands that he is the only person who can "abolir la souffrance de sa fille" (p.56) [abolish his daughter's suffering]. He wants her to understand that he will always be at her side to protect her and kisses her face gently but then, "dans un élan incontrôlé, [il] passa ses deux mains autour du cou de Johanne et se mit à l'embrasser tendrement sur chaque tempe" (p.56) [carried away, [he] put his two hands round Johanne's neck and began to kiss her tenderly on both sides of her forehead]. This description is ambiguous, the words "carried away" implying sexual attraction or they could quite simply suggest fatherly concern. Johanne becomes hysterical, no longer recognising her father. Like Mina, Johanne suffers a mental breakdown, and is treated by the family psychiatrist, a Dr Nabil. She diagnoses that Johanne is in love with her father in an improper sense and is desperately unhappy, because she feels her love is not reciprocated. However the psychiatrist is anxious to avoid breaking up the family and especially does not wish to destroy the father/daughter relationship. Instead she lessens the impact of her diagnosis slightly by referring to the obsessional, rather than the taboo, nature of Johanne's love for her father, and advises that Johanne enter her hospital for treatment. In this way the psychiatrist assigns herself the role of social arbitrator for it might be posited that such a decision refuses to face up to the implications of taboo love and attempts instead to rationalise it by attributing it to a psychological disorder, an "obsession" which she can then attempt to "cure" and control. However, in spite of a lot of time and dedication to her patient Dr Nabil is unable to convince Johanne that she is not totally in love with her father.

The tone of the novel changes at this time. Johanne feels much happier as her father starts to pay her more attention, and she believes he is still in love with her. The narration also changes from third to first person, but it is still difficult to gauge exactly the state of affairs between Johanne and her father as she has a tendency to hyperbole
and abstraction. Johanne’s equilibrium is maintained for a further four years until a visit to a jeweller’s to choose a present for her twentieth birthday from her father. There she learns that her father has bought a pearl necklace for her mother the previous week but, unable to find it amongst her mother’s jewellery, Johanne deduces that her father must have a mistress. She cannot believe that someone she has looked upon as “[s]on idéal, [s]on Dieu” [[her] ideal, [her] God] was just “un homme comme les autres” (p.81) [a man like the rest]. She begins to spy on her father and one evening, phoning him late at his office, she discovers that he has a mistress and she feels totally deceived. Johanne’s sense of betrayal by her father at this point in the narrative evokes Mina’s feelings of deception by her father, also viewed as a God-like figure in Sous la cendre le feu. Although Mina’s feelings are not explicitly caused by sexual jealousy in connection with her father, as is the case with Johanne, nevertheless the sexual connotations present in the latter relationship are also present in the former, due to the sexual nature of the father’s conduct.

Johanne plans to try and forget her unhappiness by immersing herself in studying music. At the Conservatorium in Abidjan she meets a young American named Franck Allory who offers to be her private tutor. In a romance typical of those described in eau de rose fiction, they fall in love at first sight and he proposes marriage on their first evening out together. Upon Johanne’s return home her father is waiting up for her, visibly agitated that Johanne could sacrifice their relationship for an opportunist. Johanne does not hear from Franck Allory after that night and, a month later, she flees from the family home. From this point in the narrative to the novel’s end, events become more and more incredible: she spends days walking aimlessly and then describes a scene where she is fighting off her father who, seconds later is shouting and panting like “une bête sauvage,” (p.105) [a wild beast] whereupon she loses consciousness. This whole sequence would appear to be yet another kind of dream or hallucination, for there is nothing in the narrative to explain Eric Favier’s sudden appearance or irrational conduct.

Other incredible events follow when she is discovered by a labourer who takes her to be looked after by an old woman in the village, a féticheuse and traditional healer. Under the old woman’s care Johanne’s life is described as idyllic, where she must work hard but where she is close to nature, unconcerned about any passionate love affairs, either
with her father or Franck Allory. This whole sequence appears to be an attempt on the part of the narrator to return Johanne to some kind of Edenic existence where she is unperturbed by questions of sin and guilt. However, she is soon ejected from this “Garden of Eden” when the old woman with whom she is staying attempts to give her in marriage to the young man who saved her, but Johanne once again manages to escape. Reunited with Frank Allory she learns that he did not keep in touch with her because Favier had threatened to ruin him and his parents. Hearing all this, Johanne purchases a gun and, after a final argument with her father, shoots him dead.

The priest’s response to Johanne’s story is to question whether Johanne may have deceived herself into believing that her father loved her and he asks her directly if she and her father ever had sexual intercourse. Johanne avoids a direct answer, responding that she had “desiré très fort cette vie idéale” [very strongly desired this ideal life] and how she had wanted to “arracher à pleine dents ces instants d’insouciance” [make the utmost of those carefree moments]. The priest does not press for an explicit answer, but wonders why Johanne’s mother had not reacted to this state of affairs. Johanne’s incredulity at the priest’s question shows that she is scarcely rational. The obsessional nature of Johanne’s love for her father is also underlined when she admits that she has always refused to acknowledge Odile Favier as her father’s wife. Although the priest empathises with Johanne’s plight, indeed, he is reduced to tears by her “confession,” nevertheless he is sceptical about her account of her relationship with her father. He presses her as to whether she may have imagined her father’s interest in her and even whether she has killed him because he did not respond to her advances, which Johanne denies. The priest’s repeated questioning of the truth of Johanne’s revelations is another factor in the reader’s perplexity when attempting to draw his or her own conclusions concerning the reliability of Johanne’s account and, like the psychiatrist in Sous la cendre le feu, he is intent on denying the existence of such a taboo situation.

Les Haillons de l’amour differs from Sous la cendre le feu and most romantic fiction in that it does not conform to the “happy ever after” ending normally associated with such narratives. In his article on transgression in black African literature Pierre N’Da mentions Les Haillons de l’amour as an example of sexual transgression, describing Johanne as “‘[v]ictime de sa passion aveugle, victime aussi de la reculade de son père”
According to N'Da, in such novels the themes of love and death are closely linked due to the forbidden nature of such love and in them it is suggested that it is "dans la mort et au-delà de la mort, dans un autre monde, que cette union se réalisera et s'épanouira. Tel est le message" [in death and beyond death, in another world, that this union will be achieved and flourish. This is the message]. Two points arise out of N'Da's comments which are pertinent to my discussion. Firstly, he evidently believes that the father/daughter relationship is incestuous and that Johanne's father reciprocates her passion. As N'Da's comments on this novel are confined to half a page, he does not comment on the unreliability of the narration and other disconcerting aspects of the novel which I have examined. Secondly, the "other world" referred to by N'Da, that which occurs after death, if it exists, is scarcely likely to be one where sexual passion would flourish, as he suggests. Although I agree that love and death in this novel are linked because of the taboo nature of such love, I contend that it is more specifically the illicit nature of female desire that is punished. Although Eric Favier also meets his death, it is at the hands of his distraught daughter rather than, as in Johanne's case, in a court trial where she is judged by her peers for her illegal actions. From the outset, Johanne is the one who "desires"; it is she who attempts to instigate an affair with her father and it is through her imagination that such desires are delineated. However, she appears to be denied any form of orgasmic release because her desire is forbidden and her death is the final interceptor of such a desire. Indeed, it is only towards the end of the novel that she is the object of the male gaze of both Franck Allory and her father, the latter described as jealous of her new lover, although again from the daughter's perspective.

There is a sense then that Johanne's narrative is a quest for self-immolation due to the taboo nature of her love for her father. When she discovers that Eric Favier may have a mistress she believes that she may be being punished for having "désiré l'indésirable" (p.83) [desired the undesirable]. When Johanne falls ill, she at first refuses to see a doctor. She is unable to eat and believes that her illness will result in death, which she sees as deserved. The very morning she is due to visit the psychiatrist she contemplates suicide, but, interrupted by her mother, decides against this. Moreover, Johanne confides in the priest that although initially wishing to defend herself
at trial, she has quickly renounced such an aim, convinced that nobody would believe or understand her. At both the beginning of the novel and its end, the priest offers to intercede, but she refuses. According to Johanne the most important issue is to have been able to “exorciser un passé qui lui pesait” (p.124) [exorcise a past which was weighing upon her]. The taboo nature of incest is underlined in her death wish. Indeed, not only does Eric Favier meet his death, but his wife, who may also be being punished for her lack of awareness of such a liaison, is also described as if her life is over: “Le regard sans vie et le mutisme tragique d’une Odile Favier vieillie, usée par le chagrin” (p.123) [The lifeless appearance and tragic silence of an Odile Favier suddenly looking old, worn out by despair]. The question raised by the text therefore is whether the punishment of Johanne Favier for her illicit desire and, indeed, her own desire for punishment, are the novelist’s way of reinscribing the taboo nature of incest. Moreover, in the novelist’s condemnation of her heroine and in her punishment of the mother, is she also stressing the tendency to apportion blame to the “victim” and her mother, a feature which I have raised in relation to the other novels discussed in connection with incest? The whole notion of “victim” and “aggressor” is in fact overturned for not only does it appear that the daughter is the person seeking the relationship, one is never sure whether such sentiments are reciprocated.

The focus on melodrama by the author raises the question of whether this novel reflects an honest attempt to depict a young woman’s obsession, to the point of madness, with her father or whether it is a poorly plotted and scripted novel with little thought given to credible characterisation and events. Novels such as Sous la cendre le feu and Les Haillons de l’amour may be considered as belonging to a less well-regarded genre of fiction, that of the romantic novel, with stereotypical plots and one-dimensional characterisation. This type of popular fiction is often considered suspect, full of worthless fantasies, where female protagonists are poor role models for their gender. Germaine Greer has criticised such texts as reinforcing patriarchal gender structures and keeping women locked into their secondary gender position in society. However, Greer reads such women readers as being deluded, whereas it may be argued that women who read this type of novel are indeed able to discriminate. In recent years, however, the whole genre of romantic fiction has undergone a new scrutiny in the West with the emergence of a literary criticism which challenges the division between “high”
art and “popular” culture. Many feminist critics now attempt to explain the popularity of romantic fiction in more positive terms, maintaining that popular fiction gives women more agency than most critics would allow for. Alison Light, for example, believes that “Feminists must baulk at any ... conclusion which implies that the vast audience of romance readers are either masochistic or inherently stupid.” As she further suggests, “[Reading] is a process which helps to query as well as endorse social meanings and one which therefore remains dynamic and open to change.”

Some critics suggest that the popularity of romantic fiction derives from the vicarious pleasure it provides women who otherwise lead rather uneventful lives. In her enquiry into the popularity of Harlequin romances Snitow comments: “Stereotyped female roles are charged with an unlikely glamour, and women’s daily routines are revitalized by the pretense that they hide an ongoing sexual drama.” Snitow would appear to endorse Radway’s explanation for the popularity of such fiction: “it provides vicarious emotional nurturance by prompting identification between the reader and a fictional heroine whose identity as a woman is always confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male.”

Although little research on the “romance” novel appears to have been carried out in relation to African fiction, it has been suggested by one critic in the field that there are both similarities and dissimilarities between these novels and their Western counterparts. Bryce believes that one such difference concerns the nature of the obstacles which are placed in the way of the protagonists’ finding “true love,” which in the African context are frequently provided by religion and ethnicity. Certainly the difference of ethnicity is a factor in the “romance” of Emilienne and Joseph in the novel *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, as I discussed in chapter 1. With regard to *Les Haillons de l’amour* incest is certainly regarded as a sin by religion although it is also a cultural taboo independent of official religion. Bryce believes that such obstacles used in the African context enable authors to “explore specific social imperatives” and that “rather than escapist fantasy, romantic love becomes a trope for the desire for change, both personal and social, and for the belief in the possibility of change.” Although this is indeed the case with both *Sous la cendre le feu* and *Les Haillons de l’amour*, the value of the authors’ contribution to such a debate is not substantial. Perhaps Bryce is too easily dismissing the possible recuperative benefits of romance in the Western context,
and too readily attributing them to romance in the African context. Certainly, in the novels I have commented upon in this category, there is some intimation in *Sous la cendre le feu* that romantic love may be the impetus for a commitment to a more caring and sharing relationship which is endorsed by the community, but there is little suggestion of this in *Les Haillons de l’amour.*

**Conclusion**

Father/daughter relationships in all of the novels discussed are governed by conflicts of varying degrees due to many different factors. The framework of my discussion has been built around two major themes: patriarchy and incest. Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* recounts a rebellion of two daughters, at a high cost, against the confining strictures of both patriarchy and colonialism in their societies. Patriarchy is shown to be endemic in the Rhodesia of the 1960s and 70s, to the extent that it takes an exceptional will to battle against such an institution. Dangarembga’s use of Sartre’s preface to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* focuses the reader on the psychological impact of colonisation on indigenous populations. In then making a young woman the narrator of this tale, Dangarembga highlights the experience of the indigenous female whose perspective is so often omitted. It has been noted by various commentators that Dangarembga also omits any reference to the chimurenga struggle for national liberation, unlike Maraire’s novel *Zenzele* discussed in the previous chapter, although Charles Sugnet suggests that there are some allusions to this.67 Dangarembga herself when questioned as to how aware she was of the struggle for independence, notes that it did not affect her to a large extent, that indeed “It’s embarrassing when looking back: how was it possible to be living in the middle of that and to feel that one is really in calm water?”68 The nearest she came to being aware of the situation was when teaching at a mission in 1977 when some of her pupils did not attend because they were undergoing military training. Perhaps then, Dangarembga’s novel reflects an attempt to convey this period of her country’s history from her own perspective. Just as she, the author of *Nervous Conditions*, was marginalised from the struggle, so too are her protagonists.
Instead Dangarembga concentrates on both the advantages and disadvantages of being exposed to a Western education. It is finally Tambu’s grandmother whose pragmatism enables her to comprehend its significance although she is adamant that an exposure to Western education must be accompanied with a sound knowledge of one’s country’s history, focused from the indigenous perspective, not that written in the history books that Nyasha is unable to “swallow” both literally and figuratively. The grandmother’s astuteness allows her to understand colonial hegemony at an early stage and the necessity of inserting oneself into such a system of domination, but always from an informed position. Just as Tambu also comes to perceive that, on a personal level, she has been adversely influenced by the authority commanded by the patriarchal Babamukuru, so too does the novel’s trajectory suggest a questioning of the whole nature of the colonialist patriarchal ideology so pervasive in this novel and, as such, *Nervous Conditions* is thereby an endorsement, if not an overt one, of the war for self-determination being fought at this time.

Patriarchal ideology is also questioned in Sow Fall’s *L’Ex-père de la nation* and Tadjo’s *Le Royaume aveugle*. Like Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, these novels interrogate patriarchy at a personal level through the father/daughter relationship and, at a national level, through a paternal governance which admits no dissent. Whereas in *Nervous Conditions* this primarily encompasses a discussion of colonialism, in Sow Fall’s novel, although this certainly features, her principal aim seems to be to discuss the internal machinations of a post-colonial corrupt dictatorship which is still too dependent on its former colonial masters. Sow Fall shows the difficulty encountered by Madiama, a weak-willed individual, in mediating between the various demands upon him. It is at the moment of Madiama’s daughter’s death that he appears to lose all “fatherly” feeling for his people and he is no longer a “Father of the Nation.” In this way Sow Fall could be said to be underlining the importance of the family and familial relationships in pointing towards a healthy national situation. Madiama’s betrayal of his first wife, Coura, and consequently also his daughter, appear to hasten his demise as President. However, power has been transferred from the dictator Madiama to other dictators, thus enabling the perpetuation of a brutal, patriarchal regime. At the novel’s conclusion, however, the individual patriarch is powerless in his prison cell, being visited by his betrayed wife Coura. Although his first-person narrative, which he undertakes to write
in prison, is self-empowering, he is totally reliant on his wife’s visits. As Miller notes: “The novel closes on Madiama in prison, while Coura, free, gives shape and direction to his days.” No longer is Madiama in a position to choose the way he wishes to lead his life, whereas Coura may choose to be magnanimous towards him. As Miller further notes: “This narrative of events simultaneously leading to and flowing from masculine confinement reveals itself to be the narration of a feminine progression toward freedom,” although it must be noted that Madiama’s daughter, Nafi, and his second wife, Yande, do not fare so well.

In the case of Tadjo’s *Le Royaume aveugle*, King Ato IV’s hungry desire for power is thwarted. Not only does his daughter survive, thus ensuring the continuance of the “female” principle, but the conception of her twins foregrounds the significance of her link with the ancestral spirits. While staying in the village she is initiated into the “Ceremony of the Mask” when it is decreed that she become pregnant by Karim. Such an initiation, with the wisdom it imparts, may provide Akissi with the strength to forge a more equitable kingdom which will incorporate “*Les Autres*” [The Others] into a more justly ruled society which embraces difference, rather than rejects it.

As in my discussion of patriarchy, the treatment of incest in these novels is framed by an exploration of hegemonic relationships, notably the father’s power over the daughter. As stated in Herman and Hirschman’s study of incest:

> Because a child is powerless in relation to an adult, she is not free to refuse a sexual advance. Therefore, any sexual relationship between the two must necessarily take on some of the coercive characteristics of a rape, even if, as is usually the case, the adult uses positive enticements rather than force to establish the relationship.”

Emecheta’s treatment of incest in *The Family* is somewhat ambivalent, especially in the distancing techniques she uses in her discussion of this taboo subject. Much of the detail in relation to incest appears to be based on sociological readings, perhaps not surprisingly given her training in sociology, one of its major determinants being the lack of a strong mother figure, both emotionally and physically. In suggesting that this may be a primary cause of father/daughter incest, Emecheta is implicating herself in a discussion which feminist sociologists are now contesting, seeing it as yet another patriarchal ruse to apportion blame to the woman. Certainly, however, Emecheta does
depict a victim of incest who finds the strength to rise above the abuse she has suffered and in this way, she presents us with a protagonist who has been able to overturn the power structure of familial relationships and to make them work to her own advantage. Just as in *Le Royaume aveugle*, this novel’s conclusion posits a new kind of society, one in which despotic “fathers” are not welcome. It presents a different kind of family unit, one which consists of a mother and daughter and a non-biological father who, although not married to Gwendolen, and unlikely to be so, nevertheless is a powerful presence in his daughter’s life.

Yvonne Vera’s novel, *Under the Tongue*, also portrays a change in family dynamics subsequent to father/daughter incest, with the emergence of a three-woman household. It also underlines the unspeakable nature of incest, while at the same time advocating speaking out and acting to prevent it, whatever the cost involved. Whereas in *The Family* it is suggested that one of the perpetrators of incest, Gwendolen’s father, commits suicide, in *Under the Tongue* the father is murdered by the mother to spare the daughter further suffering. No details are given of the mother’s arrest and trial, or the length of her sentence, but her release coincides with the end of the war of independence, and there is an intimation that not only is the suffering of an individual family finally over, but so too is there a hope that a whole nation may have cause for optimism. Although Vera’s writing is extremely poetic, nevertheless it is historically grounded and politically aware. No abuse of power, whether in a familial or national context, can be left unchallenged.

Mpoudi Ngolle’s novel *Sous la cendre le feu* is a “confessional” narrative which features as part of a psychoanalytic exploration of the effects of incest on a family. The description of Mina’s repressed memories and her unravelling of them works as a narrative device to hold the reader’s attention. Intertwined with this narrative are allusions to “traditional” culture which are exoticised in their presentation, as in the episode of the fétiqueur. In this way the author appears to commodify incest rather than exploring it in an insightful manner. Mina’s “cure” appears perfunctory and although it provides a resolution to the question posed at the novel’s beginning, namely the cause of her “madness,” the author does not then seek to probe the question of incest in a serious manner or to suggest its wider ramifications in the hierarchies of power which she
delineates. Her protagonist, Mina, is never able to subsequently satisfactorily resolve the issues that beset her despite being pronounced “cured” and although her husband is chastened, little has changed and the obligatory “happy ending” seems highly superficial.

The “unhappy ending” in Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour* also contains elements of superficiality, as does the whole situation of incest depicted in this novel. One is never sure in this novel who precisely is the victim. Is it Johanne or her father? The novel never satisfactorily resolves this question although it does present a different interpretation of the “victim syndrome” discussed in sociological data, which forms part of most fiction regarding this issue, as it does in Emecheta’s novel. In *Les Haillons de l’amour*, the protagonist acts out a self-victimisation after having taken the ultimate act of resistance against her imagined aggressor. The “victim syndrome” is therefore presented rather differently in this novel. Rather than questioning the power dynamics in the father/daughter relationship, the novel appears to uphold the status quo in its punishment of female desire and it also subscribes to a female propensity for self-sacrifice and self-blame, also present in *Sous la cendre le feu*.

I have discussed Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour* by alluding to the romance genre with which it may be compared. Certainly it deviates somewhat from the Western genre and also from African romance fiction. Indeed, the novel may be considered more “Western” than “African” in relation to the romance genre in its escapist propensities and lack of interest in social issues. It also shows a tendency towards superficial exoticism in its depiction of romantic landscapes. Egypt, the location of the family holiday, is certainly described in such a perspective, as is the protagonist’s place of refuge when she escapes from her home. Such exoticisation may suggest a target Western audience, but it adds lack of authenticity to an already overly dramatic exploration of the subject, whatever the author’s aim.

The novels referred to in this section depict father/daughter relationships which are all concerned to some extent with questions of power. Intersecting with relations of power are issues of gender whereby “daughters” attempt to assert themselves independently from their fathers, most notably in *Nervous Conditions* and *L’Ex-père de la nation*. In
Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* Babamukuru's oppressive rule is possible due to his enormous prestige as a headmaster in a colonised country. Equally, in Sow Fall's *L'Ex-père de la nation* Madiama's tyrannical regime is the result of the power and prestige allotted to him and the governance entrusted to him by the former colonial masters. Whereas Madiama's power is exploitative, the authority exercised by Babamukuru is one which coerces and directs and attempts to impose a point of view. In Emecheta's *The Family* the father exploits his daughter's emotional needs and his physical strength. He has no idea that Gwendolen has already been subjected to the ordeal of sexual abuse in her past and is therefore conditioned to hopelessness, making his conquest of her all the more possible. However, an escape from this unhealthy situation is possible because of sexual desire which takes place outside the father's influence. Like *Nervous Conditions* and *L'Ex-père de la nation*, Vera's *Under the Tongue* includes a discussion of oppressive power dynamics at the level of the nation as well as the level of the family and it is suggested that a violent response is sometimes the only solution. In Mpoudi Ngolle's *Sous la cendre le feu* issues of power are never satisfactorily resolved. The psychiatric discourse contained in the novel is one which puts power into the hands of the physician, a representative of the patriarchal establishment, however benevolent, but this power is never attained by its female protagonists. At the novel's end it appears that the power dynamics in the family are not radically altered, or even questioned. In *Les Haillons de l'amour*, power is something which the daughter has given to her father arbitrarily. The whole issue of incest may be a projection of the daughter's mind, a fantasy spiralling out of control. In this novel the sometime narrator is intensely involved with her father, but there is no objective evidence of the relationship. There is no real acknowledgement that incest has taken place and in this way the novel avoids confronting the issue directly.

In all of the novels discussed, not only does the arena in which the exercise of power arise differ from novel to novel, but they all explore the father/daughter relationship from different perspectives and in different modes, from a realist to a mythical depiction, from a poetic treatment to a more literal scenario, from melodramatic sensationalism to a more serious investigation. However, a common feature of all these novels is the endemic nature of patriarchy, whether traditional or Western. In all of them patriarchy has been represented at the level of "father" of the family, the
community, the medical establishment, the Church and the nation. However, patriarchal ideology can be contested, and in all of the novels studied there is an overt, or at the very least, a veiled, challenging of the “rule” of the Father.

Notes

1 Barbara H. Sheldon, “Introduction” to Daughters and Fathers in Feminist Novels (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1997), pp.11-15, p.11.
2 Ibid., p.12.
5 The interrelationship and reflexivity between domestic and national “patriarchies” is a recurrent theme in the work of Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah, who has focused on this and other issues in valuing women, perhaps to a greater extent than any other male writer. See, for example, Derek Wright’s The Novels of Nuruddin Farah (Bayreuth: Eckhard Breitinger, 1994).
7 See endnote 10 of Chapter 2.
8 Corcoran also comments that the fathers studied in father/son relationships in novels written in the post-independence period “are incapable of assuming the paternal role figure,” “Fathers and Sons in African Fiction,” p.96.
11 Ibid., p.8.
13 Ibid., p.21.
14 Stratton, Contemporary African Literature, p.107. Miki Flockemann sees Nervous Conditions as a subversion of the Bildungsroman with its dual focus of both the protagonist and her cousin. She believes this acts as “strategy for bridging the uncomfortable and problematic relationship between insider/outsider, self/other in writing by black women in the post-colonial context, where women have been traditionally positioned as object (or native/other).” See “Not-Quite Insiders and Not-Quite Outsiders: The ‘Process of Womanhood’” in Beka Lamb, Nervous Conditions and Daughters of the Twilight Journal of Commonwealth Literature 27.1 (1992): 37-47, p.38.
15 Stratton cites Dangarembga as one of the more recent novelists to have adopted what she refers to as a literary “convention of the paired women” whereby the novelist depicts “the familial or social juxtaposition of two female characters [...] who, in their response to male domination, are the antithesis of each other, one passively submitting, one actively resisting,” Contemporary African Literature, p. 97. Nicki Hitchcott has also noted in Beyala’s fiction “the number of pairs of women structuring the narratives,” all of them “evolv[ing] from two very separate identities to a kind of symbiotic fusion,” Women Writers in Francophone Africa, p.138.
In an interview Dangarembga has cited first of all the patriarchal system as the cause of the unequal treatment of boys and girls. However, she also admits that the situation in her part of the world is a little more complicated because “the men are also in a position of powerlessness.” Thus she feels that economic reasons also contribute to such inequality for a family knows that an educated male will be able to help his family afterwards. See “Between Gender, Race and History: Kirsten Holst Petersen Interviews Tsitsi Dangarembga” in Into the Nineties: Post-Colonial Women’s Writing, in Anna Rutherford, Lars Jensen and Shirley Chew, eds., (Armidale: Dangaroo Press, 1994), pp.344-48, p.345.

Dangarembga is asked by Holst Petersen whether she is not presumptuous to transport a disease which “is a symptom of the affluent West, to a continent where people still starve to death.” In response, Dangarembga tells of the cases of anorexia that have been reported in Zimbabwe, particularly in the middle classes, in “Between Gender, Race and History,” p.346. As Derek Wright has also commented “The use of food for the purpose of protest is not merely an English affectation indulged in by Nyasha, and her condition is not a solitary but a common and collective one,” citing Mainini, Maiguru and Tambu as other examples of characters who refuse food in opposition to Babamukuru’s ‘neocolonial impositions’.” Derek Wright, “Regurgitating Colonialism: The Feminist Voice in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions,” in Derek Wright, ed., New Directions in African Fiction (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997). pp.108-22, p.117.

Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to The Wretched of the Earth (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.7-26, p.17. Trans. from the French by Constance Farrington. The original translation reads “The status of ‘native’ is a nervous condition.”

Other critics have commented on the symptoms of Babamukuru’s alienation. Sue Thomas has claimed that his sense of alienation is signalled “through his body,” citing the “bad nerves” he suffers from “a common symptom of male hysteria.” She comments that it is only “while driving his nuclear family back to the ancestral Shona land, that he relaxes.” See “Killing the Hysteric in the Colonized’s House: Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions,” Journal of Commonwealth Literature 27.1 (1992): 26-36, p.29.

Sartre, p.13 of Preface to Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth.

See for example Supriya Nair’s “Melancholic Women: The Intellectual Hysteric(s) in Nervous Conditions,” Research in African Literatures 26.2 (1995): 130-39, where she states that “[w]hat this history [of colonialism] fails to record is a different kind of tension that the colonized female, who has not been inactive in physical, guerrilla or military action, embodies in her other equally valid reactions to colonialism and patriarchy,” pp.132-33. She further comments: “Qadri Ismail’s critique of Fanon’s seamless alignment of violence, patriarchy, and nationalism notes that even in the psychiatric cases, the colonized female is largely absent,” p.132 citing Qadri Ismail, “Boys Will Be Boys: Gender and National Agency in Frantz Fanon and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam,” South Asia Bulletin 11.1-2 (1991): 79-83, p.80. Michelle Vizzard also comments that the studies undertaken by Fanon detailed in The Wretched of the Earth are “almost entirely silent on the question of women, and their position as colonial subjects... Thus, despite the inclusion of some women within his cases, his theories of colonial oppression remain gender-blind.” See “Of Mimicry and Woman: Hystera and Anticolonial Feminism in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions” in SPAN: Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies 36 (1993): 202-10, p.205. See also Elleke Boehmer, Colonial and Postcolonial Literature, where she comments that Dangarembga’s book is “feminizing Fanon’s findings on colonial cultural alienation,” p.228.


Sartre’s emphasis, Preface to The Wretched of the Earth, p.17.

Father/daughter relationships in other African novels have been shown to be affected by the father’s polygamy. For example, in Mariama Bâ’s Une si longue lettre when Modou takes as his second wife a school friend of his daughter’s and in Sembène Ousmane’s Xala: roman (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1973) when he takes as a third wife a woman who is younger than his daughter from his first marriage.


In Bâ’s novel, Mawdo’s mother wishes him to marry her niece, Nabou, whom she has raised in her own image, hoping thereby to destroy his relationship with his first wife, Aïssatou.


Ibid. Miller makes the point that Madiama is “portrayed alternately as the child and the father of his nation,” but does not deduce from this the fact that this usage is referring to Madiama’s status as a citizen of his country, p.103.

See, for example, Peter Hawkins’ “Marxist Intertext, Islamic Reinscription? Some Common Themes in the Novels of Sembène Ousmane and Aminata Sow Fall,” in Laila Ibnifassi and Nicki Hitchcott, eds.,


*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.*


Marie Umeh tells of this story in her “Introduction: (En)Gendering African Womanhood: Locating Sexual Politics in Igbo Society and Across Boundaries,” to *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, ed. Marie Umeh, pp.xxxiii-xlili, p.xxxx, also endnote no 8, p.xl. Apparently during a lecture to Umeh’s students at The City University of New York in March 1991, Emecheta informed them that eight out of ten of the students who spoke to her had been sexually abused.

A pertinent example is the francophone novel *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* by Simone Schwarz-Bart (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1972) where the relationship between grandmother and granddaughter is extremely close. In fact, in this instance, the mother entrusts her daughter to the grandmother in order to prevent a possible incident of incest at a later date: “Le premier soin de ma mère fut de m’éloigner, d’écarter ma petite chair de dix ans pour s’éviter de la peine, quelques années plus tard, de danser sur le ventre qui l’aurait trahi,” p.46 [My mother’s first concern was to send me away, remove my little ten-year-old flesh in order to save herself the trouble, a few years later, of trampling on the womb that betrayed her].

Herman with Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, p.93. In a survey of stories by 40 incest victims, most of them in Massachusetts, 13 had attempted to run away.

Ibid., p.45.

Ibid.

For more details, see Janet Liebman Jacobs, “Reassessing Mother Blame In Incest” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 30.3 (1990): 500-14.

Christine Sizemore, “The London Novels of Buchi Emecheta,” in *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, pp. 367-85, p.377. She cites the work of Herman with Hirschman, whom I have already referred to, in reaching this decision.

Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, p.278.

Driver and Droisen, eds., *Child Sexual Abuse*, p.2.

See the section on *Butterfly Burning*, Chapter 2, pp.102-06.

Tuzyline Jita Allan, “Trajectories of Rape in Buchi Emecheta’s Novels,” p.222.

Other commentators suggest that Emecheta is distancing herself from describing incest abuse in African cultures by this device. See, for example, Christine W. Sizemore’s “The London Novels of Buchi Emecheta,” pp.367-85, p.374; also Allan’s “Trajectories of Rape in Buchi Emecheta’s Novels,” p.221; Ogunyemi even comments that Emecheta’s action “is hardly a sisterly move for a writer reaching out to the African diaspora to claim kin,” *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, p.271.

Emecheta has spoken about how the “African father will not have sex with his daughter, because he knows that he will then be cheated of the bride price. If she is a virgin on the wedding night, he will get more palm wine and more money. The West Indians have no bride price, but the father thinks that the child is his daughter and loves him, and therefore she will not say anything [about incest]. In both cases the man regards his daughter as his property,” in “The Dilemma of Being in between Two Cultures,” in Raoul Granqvist and John Stotesbury, Interviewers and eds., *African Voices: Interviews with Thirteen African Writers* (Sydney: Dangaroo Press, 1989), pp.17-20, p.20. Herman/Hirschman’s comments are also relevant here when they cite Claude Levi-Strauss’s *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949): “The prohibition of incest is less a rule prohibiting marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than a rule obliging the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others. It is the supreme rule of the gift, and it is clearly this aspect, too often unrecognized, which allows its nature to be understood.” Cited on p.50.

This intimate scene of learning the alphabet is in direct contrast to the one described in Ken Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou* discussed on p.116 of chapter 2.
and educator]. Cited in I'educateur the same processes in therapeutic rituals. Is not to name something as psychoanalysis therefore not to name as psychoanalytic we can find in other cultures, so-called archaic or primitive cultures, that use suggested that we don't have to see white people as inventing psychoanalysis - many processes that we have invented it?" in “A Conversation about Race and Class” in Marianne Hirsch & Evelyne Fox Keller, eds., Conflicts in Feminism (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) pp.60-81, p.65.

For the applicability of Freudian theory, more especially the Oedipan complex, to the African situation, see Marie Cecile and Edmond Ortigues, Oedipe africain (Paris: Plon 10/18, 1976). See also Awa Thiam, Le Continent noir (Paris: Tercce, 1987), particularly her chapter “Freud et le continent ‘noir’ Afrique,” pp.79-84. Thiam did not believe in the applicability of the Oedipan complex to the African situation at the time her work was published (1987), citing such factors as the extended African family, polygamy and the parents’ choice of marriage partners for their children in a traditional context although she believed that it could not be ruled out in the future. See also Nicki Hitchcott’s article, “African Oedipus?” which attempts to determine the applicability of Freud’s theories of sexuality, particularly femininity, to an African context and in which she parallels Freud’s theory of the castration complex to clitoridectomy in the construction of a woman’s sexual identity. Hitchcott critiques the Ortigues’ rejection of “their female case-histories in favour of an almost exclusively men-centred study” which “recalls Freuds remarks concerning what he considered to be the inaccessibility (or rather the impenetrability) of femininity.” Paragraph 16.1 (1993): 59-67, pp.61, 64. See also chapter 5, “La psychanalyse en Afrique” in Michel Cornaton, Pouvoir et sexualité dans le roman africain (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), pp.45-53.

If this is indeed the view of Mpoudi Ngolle, then this reasoning is also shared by the Nigerian critic, Ogunyemi in her work Africa Wo/Man Palava. Responding to Nancy Chodorow’s proposal that men should take an equal share in parenting, Ogunyemi believes that such “theories fail to tackle the harrowing problem of incest, which arises from unhealthy intimacy between father and daughter in the confining nuclear family.” Moreover, Ogunyemi further posits that the Nigerian woman “would prefer to be given the wherewithal to make her parenting successful and empowering rather than have men share the parenting, eroding the space that gives her authority.” Africa Wo/Man Palava, p.78.

According to Sheldon, Daughters and Fathers in Feminist Novels, “walled gardens and other images of enclosure” reflect the various fathers’ attempts “to keep their daughters incarcerated in their code of values and beliefs,” p.25.

In detailing the romance’s mimetic effect, Radway points out that one of the most crucial linguistic devices is “the genre’s careful attention to the style, color, and detail of women’s fashions.” Further, she posits that a “similar sort of descriptive detail also characterizes the mention of domestic architecture and home furnishings in romantic fiction.” Certainly, Les Haillons de l’amour is full of descriptions of the luxuriousness of the house furnishings, down to the smallest details. Janice A. Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), pp.193, 194.

In an interview with Isaïe Biton Koulibaly, Aka confirms that with regard to incest in her novel, she had wanted to introduce an element of doubt so as to “rendre le lecteur actif” [require the reader to be active] in deciding for his or her self whether incest occurs. Amina 295 (nov. 1994): 28.


Ibid.

Emphasis added.

In the Koulibaly interview with Aka, already referred to, Aka comments that it is indeed Johanne’s mother who is to blame for her predicament: “La femme africaine ne doit pas, comme la mère de Johanne l’a fait, privilégier sa vie professionnelle et son émancipation au détriment du bien-être familial,” p. 28. [The African wife must not, as did Johanne’s mother, favour her career and her emancipation at the cost of the family’s well-being].

See the chapter entitled “Romance” in her book The Female Eunuch (1970; London: Flamington, 1991), pp.192-212. Greer writes: “If female liberation is to happen, if the reservoir of real female love is to be tapped, this sterile self-deception [regarding the character of the hero] must be counteracted,” p.212.

relation between the consumers and sellers of mass culture: in this newer view, popularity is by
definition considered a species of vitality. In other words, consumers are not seen merely as passive
repositories, empty vessels into which debilitating ideologies are poured." See "Mass Market Romance:
Pornography for Women is Different," in Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, eds.,
62 Janice Radway, Reading the Romance, p.113. The other main reason she posits for the romance
fiction’s popularity is that "it fills a woman’s mental world with the varied details of simulated travel
and permits her to converse imaginatively with adults from a broad spectrum of social space," Ibid.
63 Jane Bryce, "Women and Modern African Popular Fiction," in Karin Barber, ed., Readings in
African Popular Culture (Booington: Indiana University Press; Oxford: James Currey, 1997), pp.118-
25.
64 Ibid., p.122.
65 Ibid., pp.121, 122. In her chapter, “Speaking in the First Person: Romantic Fiction by Women in
concludes that “[i]n spite of the social taboo on women’s expression of their sexuality, much narrative
space is devoted to the physical and emotional effects of women’s sexual experience,” p.43. She
believes that “[a]lthough the texts do not promote change, they demonstrate the imbalance of social
systems of exchange,” p.44. Discussing their difference to the Western genre of romance, she further
comments: “Unlike its Western counterparts which ‘supply a myth in the guise of the truly possible’,
Radway, Reading the Romance, 207] the African romance is a contemporary parable written by and
for African women,” p.44.
66 For example, romance’s acknowledgement that fantasy is a natural part of human existence and that
female desires that are unacceptable to society can be written and read through this kind of fiction. It
also allows for quite active female protagonists and a female narrative voice.
67 Charles Sugnet, “Nervous Conditions: Dangarembga’s feminist reinvention of Fanon,” in Obioma
Nnaemeka, ed., The Politics of (M)Othering, pp.33-49. Sugnet points to just “three direct [...] brief
and passing” references to Zimbabwe’s national history. He contends that “the narrator’s coming to
consciousness parallels the suppressed developments of the chimurenga struggle,” pp. 34, 46.
70 Ibid.
71 Herman with Hirschman, Father-Daughter Incest, p.27.
72 Snitow refers to the “exotic” in her study of the Harlequin romance formula. She cites Harlequin
Enterprises’ Writers Market (1977) which stipulates that there must be emphasis on travel. Snitow
continues, “Several of the books have passages that probably come straight out of guide books, but the
particular setting is not the point, only that it is exotic, a place elsewhere,” (emphasis in original). She
further notes, “Harlequins also avoid all mention of local peculiarities beyond the merely scenic. They
reduce the allure of difference, of travel, to a mere travelogue,” suggesting that the “denatured quality”
of such an approach enables any reader to identify with the work. See “Mass Market Romance,” pp.
248, 251.
73 In an article entitled “Ecritures romanesques féminines: L’art et la loi des Pères,” Romuald-Blaise
Fonkoua explores the writing of African and Caribbean francophone women writers and concludes that
the prevailing discourse is that of “la loi des Pères.” Nouvelles Ecritures féminines. Notre Librairie
This study of anglophone and francophone African women writers has been structured around relationships. In the first chapter the relationship between family obligations and romantic attachments and economic and social factors was explored. In the second chapter the relationship between mothers and daughters was read against a background of many different competing traditional, colonial and neo-colonial factors. In the third chapter the literary exposition of excision was explored in relation to the “insider/outsider” discourse and in the last chapter father/daughter relationships were discussed in relation to incest and patriarchy. All such discussions raised many important issues concerning both gender and conflict as well as questions of power.

The concept of gender relates to constructions of the female as well as to the male. Although my focus has been on the work of African women writers, nevertheless the issues they raise are equally applicable to both men and women. In depicting women protagonists who are complex, active individuals, unlike earlier descriptions of women protagonists by African male writers, both anglophone and francophone African women writers are creating new parameters in African fiction. Additionally, although their focus has been on creating credible women protagonists, nevertheless they also explore the male psyche and there are very few stereotypical depictions of male protagonists in their writing, Calixthe Beyala in the two early novels studied being the exception. This study has depicted women protagonists who have had to struggle for self-definition and agency in the face of many difficulties. Such a struggle generates conflict which in its turn can be a source of energy and renewal and, on a less positive note, can lead to despair. Conflict has been witnessed in all of the issues studied: marriage and motherhood; the struggle for economic independence; access to education and its disruptive effect; family relationships and traditional cultural practices. Although I have noted throughout this thesis some differences in the work of anglophone and francophone writers, they have all focused on these common issues.

Where there have been differences of emphasis in the anglophone and francophone traditions these may stem from a variety of factors, but the colonisation of the respective countries is certainly significant. Sometimes a specific political event will
trigger a particular theme in a country’s literary production. This is the case in the struggle for independence in former Rhodesia, which marks the writing of Zimbabwean novelists Yvonne Vera and Nozipo Maraire. Sometimes different ideological attitudes towards colonisation by the French and British governments are apparent, particularly in the realm of education. Whereas the French imperialist ideology was based much more on a process of assimilation, the English system was less rigid. This may account for the easier transition into the educational system depicted in the anglophone novels, particularly Zenzele and Under the Tongue. In Nervous Conditions although Nyasha becomes alienated in the system, Tambu survives it and makes it work for her. Interestingly, the two francophone novels whose protagonists are implicated in the French education system, Bugul’s Le Baobab fou and Mpoudi Ngolle’s Sous la cendre le feu, both depict the female protagonists’ problematic experiences. In the former autobiographical novel Ken shows a marked alienation from the system, but such alienation is compounded by many other factors as I discussed. In the latter novel Mina’s continuing education as an adult causes conflict with her familial obligations and pressures.¹

Overwhelmingly however, these writers treat common key issues, one of which is intergenerational conflict, as depicted in connection with the issue of education. In several novels education is a source of antagonism between the female protagonist and her mother or grandmother, as in Changes, Nervous Conditions, The Family and Le Baobab fou. Occasionally it is not an issue of contention, as in Butterfly Burning and Zenzele, but in this latter novel Western education acts as a structural device and much time and space is allotted to giving value and credence to more “traditional” modes of education, in the handing down of stories and advice from generation to generation. The subject of education is less conflictual in the father/daughter relationship, except in the case of the protagonist’s biological father in Nervous Conditions. In general fathers are more accepting of a Western education for their daughters than are mothers. Education is shown to be a means of empowerment for women when they find fulfilment in their lives through interesting and worthwhile careers, but these are only ever backdrops to what seems to be more important features of these protagonists’ lives – interpersonal relationships. Perhaps, most importantly, education is a means to self-expression.

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Intergenerational conflict has also been caused by social and economic factors. Both mother/daughter and father/daughter relationships are related against a background of oppression which all impact negatively on the protagonists concerned. In the cases when the mother rejects the daughter, the latter constantly strives for a return to the intimacy that is ingrained in her memory, as in Bugul’s *Le baobab fou*. When the mother is absent the daughter never really reconciles herself to this loss, as in Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* and *Butterfly Burning*, or exorcises such a loss in the act of writing which Emecheta describes in *Head Above Water*. In all of the novels except *Zenzele*, there exists a first person narration from the daughter’s perspective which provides an intimacy appropriate for such relationship issues. However, in the father/daughter relationships cited, most of the narratives are third person, with the exception of *Nervous Conditions*, which lessens the immediacy of the father/daughter relationship. In these relationships daughters must mediate or rely on others, often the mother, or the priest, doctor or psychiatrist. There is both resignation and resistance to exploitation by fathers, and sometimes both, an example of the latter being Gwendolen in Emecheta’s *The Family*. It is noticeable that in many of these narratives the father seems to be “punished” by the woman writer for his tyranny as in Emecheta’s *The Family*, Aka’s *Les Haillons de l’amour* and Sow Fall’s *L’Ex-père de la nation*; in the two former novels this results in the father’s death and in the latter, in imprisonment. However, the daughters all survive and prosper except Johanne in *Les Haillons de l’amour* and she at least believes herself to be vindicated in her father’s murder.

Many kinds of marriage are described, from more traditional marriages which are set in pre-colonial times, as in Nwapa’s *Efuru*, to more contemporary, urban settings. These more recent novels increasingly depict nuclear families based on a Western model. They portray couples who become romantically involved and choose their own partners, often to the dismay of their respective parents, as in *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, *Changes* and *Sous la cendre le feu*. The couples decide to reject polygamy but as problems start to arise in the marriage, the husband often reneges, usually without the wife’s prior knowledge, or he enters into a *de facto* relationship, features of both *Changes* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes*. These issues are a source of great discord in the novels and are not always resolved. The authors not only describe such conflict from a personal perspective but also present them as a social and political problem. They point to the
scourge of political corruption which pervades the working environment, and penetrates into the environment of the couple. Just as some of the nations depicted are unable to live harmoniously with their neighbours, or to govern justly, so some couples are given over to selfish motivations. Marriages disintegrate and women prefer autonomy and separation.

These novels depict women protagonists who are ambivalent about the issue of motherhood. They may reject their child, even on a sub-conscious level, as instanced in Rawiri’s *Fureurs* and Aidoo’s *Changes*. Children may be rejected on a symbolic level, as in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* after Nnu Ego’s death; abortion may feature, as in *Le Baobab fou, Butterfly Burning* and Bassek’s *Tache de Sang*. However, there are indications in these works that motherhood based on a woman’s individual choice will be acceptable to the women concerned, as in Rawiri’s *Fureurs et cris de femmes* and Nwapa’s *One is Enough*. Many of the younger generation reject the idea of motherhood altogether or consider adoption instead, as described in Beyala’s *Tu t’appelleras Tanga*. A striking feature in this novel, also present in her first novel *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*, as well as in Emecheta’s *The Family*, is the reversal of the mother/daughter role.

Indeed, many protagonists, in the absence of their biological mothers, have adoptive mothers themselves, such as Ada in Beyala’s *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée* and Phephelaphi in Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*, or else mothering is considered more of a communal task as in Buchi Emecheta’s *Head Above Water*. These are not formal adoption arrangements but occur as necessity or choice dictates. Other significant issues are discussed in connection with motherhood, such as contraception in Aidoo’s *Changes* and reproduction technology in *Fureurs et cris de femmes*. These issues are then widened into a more political arena, Aidoo questioning the West’s motives in providing contraceptive aid in population control, and Rawiri seeing reproduction technology as yet another way in which women’s lives will be further circumscribed and controlled.

Not only do anglophone and francophone women writers explore many common issues, they further develop these in their use of recurring themes and motifs. Examples of these are: “romance,” the “Mother Africa” motif, the “female body,” “madness” and a
notion of the “taboo.” Florence Stratton is one critic who has considered African men and women’s writing through the use of tropes or motifs. For example, she has discussed the motif of slavery in several of Emecheta’s works. She has also studied the “Mother Africa” trope in relation to men’s writing, but believes that the African woman writer has “repudiated the trope.” Stratton may have been too categorical in her denial of such a trope in African women’s writing: I have indicated the way both Rawiri and Bugul have incorporated this trope in their works. Interestingly, this motif only occurs in francophone African women’s writing and may be due to the fact that these writers have been more influenced by the Negritude movement whose members had been educated in the French education system and whose poetic tradition was the first to incorporate the African woman as the embodiment of Africa. These women writers subvert the use of this image not only to criticise a woman’s relegation to a symbolic status, but also to politicise it, as in Rawiri’s *Fureurs et cris de femmes* which presents a “barren,” not a “fertile” Mother Africa, and juxtaposes this image with an image of neocolonial Africa which is bereft. Bugul’s use of the Mother Africa trope in *Le Baobab fou* and *Cendres et braises* appears to follow in the tradition of African men’s writing in her feelings of being torn between two cultures and in her depiction of her own mother as a silent, symbolical presence, but she undercuts the tradition by not presenting her as “all-loving.”

Anglophone and francophone African women writers alike incorporate this less romantic assessment of the “Mother Africa” trope into a notion of the female body which is described in a plethora of physical detail. Such delineations may be oppressive, as when they are marked by *anorexia nervosa* in *Nervous Conditions* and *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, marital rape in *Changes* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, miscarriage in *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, self-induced abortion in *Butterfly Burning*, excision in *Tu t’appelleras Tanga, Aman* and *Desert Flower*, and incest in *Gwendolen* and *Under the Tongue*. I have provided many examples of these; some of them are notable for the many intimate details of the female body, combined with illustrations of both physiological and psychological suffering. The female body may also be a source of great joy deriving from sexual fulfilment, as noted in *Changes*, *Fureurs*, *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* and *Le Royaume aveugle*. It may also be a source of both pain and joy, such as the childbirth described in *Le Royaume aveugle*. The female body is also used for
purposes of communication and bonding between women, as discussed in Zenzele in Shiri’s relationship with her future mother-in-law. The motif of the body is also present in Nervous Conditions, not only in anorexia nervosa, but also in the abundance of descriptions relating to bodily functions or odours. The latter are used to describe Nhamo’s sense of growing alienation from his cultural and class origins as he avoids travelling on the local bus. The former work the same way in Tambu’s attitude to the latrine on the homestead and that at her uncle’s more modern home. Perhaps the main point to stress on the subject of the body by African women’s writing is its difference from African men’s writing. Women’s bodies are not simply described as the focus of the male gaze and the locus of their desire. Rather, the women writers concerned are determined to record the many real anxieties women possess in connection with their bodies, pleasures and pain which only women experience.

Another motif associated with the female body is the notion of the “taboo.” Incest is a taboo practice in most cultures and I noted in a discussion of its representation by various women writers how they developed distancing strategies towards it. In Gwendolen Emecheta displaces the whole discussion on to another culture; in Sous la cendre le feu Mpoudi Ngolle uses the technique of psychological displacement encapsulated in her heroine’s breakdown and then her refusal to fully acknowledge its origin in incest; in Les Haillons de l’amour Aka toys with her readers, inferring the occurrence of incest but finally managing to avoid confronting the subject directly; Vera’s appraisal of the subject appears to be less restrained in its approach, but the reader still feels somewhat detached from the incidents described, perhaps because of the lack of fully rounded characters with motivation, her treatment of the subject being above all allusive and atemporal. Marital rape is likewise treated in such a way as to distance the subject matter from the reader. In Aidoo’s Changes I noted how the narrator’s light-hearted treatment of this episode belittled the subject matter somewhat and how in Emecheta’s The Joys of Motherhood Nnu Ego attempts to delude herself into thinking that her experience is not rape at all. Lesbianism is another taboo subject treated by some of these writers. It is a practice which, like homosexuality, is said not to exist in African societies. Beyala broaches the subject in C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée but presents it discretely, stressing its forbidden nature, and Bugul also alludes to a lesbian relationship somewhat cursorily. Rawiri’s Fureurs et cris de femmes treats the
subject in much more detail but she succumbs to melodrama, sensationalism and a return to the status quo. This approach tends to undermine any insights evoked by her, namely the unsatisfactory nature of the heterosexual relationships she depicts. In depicting such controversial issues the African women writers discussed are extending the frontiers of the subjects they are prepared to broach, conscious of the fact that market demands render such forbidden topics tempting for their readers. However, their contrived resolutions suggest that they are circumscribed to a certain extent, whether by their own inhibitions, or whether they perceive that any radical treatment of such subjects would receive harsh criticism, especially in their own societies.

These women writers have not only described the physiological aspects of women’s bodies, but have also focused on their psychological make-up. Many protagonists undergo a mental breakdown, as I noted in *Fureurs et cris de femmes*, *Nervous Conditions*, *Le Baobab fou*, *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*, *Gwendolen*, *Sous la cendre le feu* and *Les Haillons de l’amour*, some of them being confined to a mental institution. The only protagonist whose recovery is left in doubt is Nyasha in *Nervous Conditions*. Her breakdown is primarily the result of cultural dislocation and continued resistance to her father’s authority. Many feminist discussions of women and “madness” identify the trope of the madwoman as a resisting figure.⁸ There is little evidence for such an optimistic reading in most of the cases presented here, with one or two exceptions. In the former category, in *Le Baobab fou* Ken’s breakdown is due to cultural alienation similar to that experienced by Nyasha, aggravated by her unhappy relationship with her mother, but it signifies inability to cope rather than resistance. Emilienne in *Fureurs et cris de femmes* is also unable to face up to her husband’s infidelity and her daughter’s death. In *Sous la cendre le feu*, Mina’s breakdown functions as a form of narrative framing device and, in her loss of memory, she escapes from reality rather than confronts it and she never really acknowledges her husband’s abuse of her daughter. However, in these examples, although the protagonists’ psychological breakdown cannot be regarded as a sign of resistance, they all do make a conscious effort of will to conquer their despair and consequently survive. In *Les Haillons de l’amour*, Johanne’s breakdown is due to an inability to endure an unreciprocated love and to acknowledge that this love is “taboo.” For her, love must be paramount and break all barriers. Evidently this cannot be allowed to happen and Johanne’s love is punished. Her
breakdown could be viewed as a sign of resistance therefore, but one that the reader finds difficulty relating to. Sometimes, as in The Family, the protagonist’s breakdown is momentary, and is a form of escapism when the mental institute becomes a refuge for her. It is thus debatable whether Gwendolen’s condition can be considered in the same light as the other cases, although certainly she is a resisting figure. In C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée Ateba’s breakdown is presented as a result of a woman’s oppression in a patriarchal society, and her act of murder is described as liberating for her and in this way could be viewed as a mark of resistance. But this kind of resistance cannot be built on constructively and Ateba’s fate is uncertain. It seems then that “madness” as a form of resistance cannot be applied in its totality to the African texts studied. A more appropriate reading of these protagonists’ condition is that advocated by Cazenave who asserts that they “s’insurgent contre l’idéologie et langage dominants, créant par le biais d’une anti-héroïne, une parole nécessairement contestataire, souffle de liberté”9 [rise up against the dominant ideology and language, creating by means of an anti-heroine, a necessarily anti-establishment language, a breath of liberty].

Another motif running through many novels is that of “romance” which, like “madness,” may also provide a form of escapism. As marriage is increasingly based on personal choice in many societies in contemporary Africa, writers acknowledge the growing significance of romance by incorporating it as an important feature of such relationships. African women writers, however, seem to voice a word of caution on partnerships based on romance. Once the initial attraction has passed, the marriages disintegrate, as witnessed in Aidoo’s Changes and Rawiri’s Fureurs et cris de femmes. Romantic love is presented as an idealised fantasy sweeping away women, as in the examples of Mpoudi Ngolle’s Sous la cendre le feu and Aka’s Les Haillons de l’amour. Romantic attachments are also based on gender stereotypes, man as the hunter, woman as the hunted. However, not all romantic attachments are described in such a stereotypical manner. For example, Emecheta’s treatment of romance is more realistic in her novel The Family when she describes Gwendolen’s attachment to a young man, even to the point of mentioning Gwendolen’s concern for her hairstyle in her lovemaking. In this case a romantic attachment is shown to develop into one based on mutual friendship and is a means of fulfilment for Gwendolen and an escape from her father’s abuse. Similarly, Emecheta’s treatment of romance in The Bride Price is also
sensitively treated, and is likewise the means of escape for her protagonist, Aku-nna, from the machinations of her family, but in Aku-nna’s death, the status quo is reinstated. In *Le Royaume aveugle* the love affair between Akissi and Karim cannot survive the political manipulations of Akissi’s father. According to Cazenave their love “devient métaphore du dilemme de la nouvelle génération et de la nécessité de son sacrifice dans la construction d’une nouvelle Afrique” [becomes a metaphor of the new generation's dilemma and the necessity of its sacrifice in the construction of a new Africa]. All the other writers mentioned, in their use of irony and parody, are shown to be critical of the ideology of romance whose motivation and effects appear to demean their women protagonists and reaffirm their inferior status in a male-dominated society, as discussed in relation to *Fureurs et cris de femmes, Changes, Sous la cendre le feu* and *Les Haillons de l’amour*.

All the issues explored in this thesis are related in some way and overlap as areas of interest. For example, my discussion of “Marriage and Motherhood” and “Mothers and Daughters” also includes a discussion of the role of the African male and how the father/daughter relationship is relevant for its impact on the family unit or on the mother/daughter bond, as in *Fureurs et cris de femmes, Zenzele, The Bride Price* and *Le Baobab fou*. In fact, the significance of the absence of a father in many of these texts, such as *C’est le soleil qui m’a brûlée*, is also broached. Additionally in my study of excision, the father/daughter relationship is as significant as the mother/daughter relationship, or even more so, fathers often being the initiator of the practice. Although the father lacks a practical involvement, it is the patriarchal institutionalisation of excision that appears most significant in its perpetuation. My study of father/daughter relationships in general reveals the endemic nature of such patriarchy, both indigenous and Western in origin, and the kinds of societies that this has given rise to, where the weak are victimised, whether they are oppressed citizens in a country where they have no civil rights, or whether they are young girls who are powerless when confronted by a father’s callous disregard for their well being.

Many recent works of criticism on African women’s writing point to the significance of these women writers finding a voice in an area which has been, until very recently, totally dominated by men. One such critic, Ogunyemi, cites the eponymously named
protagonist Efuru, whom Ogunyemi describes as speaking for all rural women, who “regrets her inability to fulfil her aspirations to go to England or to ‘learn book’; books which were not written for her or in her language.” According to Ogunyemi “others can read her, but she can never read herself or acquire self-knowledge through this medium.” Since Nwapa’s earlier work, there have been depictions of women protagonists who are not only well-educated but who have often pursued their studies in the former imperial centres, as have some of the writers themselves, such as Ken Bugul, Calixthe Beyala, Buchi Emecheta and Tsitsi Dangarembga.

Ogunyemi’s citation of Nwapa’s work also raises the issue of “audience” and, more particularly, it suggests that African women writers do not address their non-literate “sisters.” Certainly, it seems reasonable to suggest that, in constructing their texts, such writers must be aware of the growing readership in the West, both in academic institutions and for a more general readership. The fact that several of these writers have now made their home in Europe must also affect the sorts of issues they are now investigating. However, it is perhaps premature to dismiss the idea of a growing African readership too readily. Two factors are significant here. Firstly, the power of the spoken word, which is still a factor in African societies. Emecheta has commented on how popular her works are in Africa where copies are passed around and books are read aloud among family members. Secondly, with the growing number of women’s groups being formed all over Africa, especially the push for improved literacy among women, novels by African women writers will increasingly be read by other African women.

As such writing becomes progressively more popular in the West, it is also becoming the focus of more and more critical writing. Kenneth Harrow has referred to the “coming of age of African women’s writing, but in asserting this point, he notes how, as a result, not much “or even any attention [is] paid to the male authors.” Certainly there have been several major critical works recently published on African women writers, but the vast majority of them have been written by other women, which could suggest an ongoing marginalisation. In some respects, therefore, it appears that women’s writing is still suffering from the neglect by male critics described by Stratton.
In delineating the conflict experienced by their women protagonists, primarily concerning their varying relationships — personal, familial, social, educational, work — women writers have commented on the various positions occupied by women in society and one major feature to emerge has been women’s constant striving to rise above the varying restrictions they find themselves caught in. Following from this it could be construed that the issue of feminism in Africa is inevitably associated with the improvement in status of its women. Ama Ata Aidoo’s response to questions concerning whether she is a feminist or not incorporates this idea:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist — especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives, and the burden of our own development. Because it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism.19

Aidoo’s feminism incorporates a pragmatic and optimistic vision of the future, and its central feature is self-governance; it is also marked by a conciliatory attitude towards gender relations, in the inclusion of men as well as women in this vision. Her remarks also encapsulate a tendency revealed by many of the writers studied to denounce Western cultural imperialism, which may encompass some trends in Western feminisms. She also comments indirectly on the widespread view, already referred to, that African women must wait for the liberation of their continent from its numerous problems before they too can be liberated.20 In her conviction that “African women must have the best that the environment can offer,” Aidoo obviously believes that women have waited long enough.

The texts provided have formed the basis for the exploration of issues in the modern world. Women have not only been producers of fiction, but also its most important commentators and consumers. Texts act to create images which passively reflect social and political issues, but they also bring into being fresh relationships between these texts and wider social and political forces. Their subject has played an active role in shaping African women’s position in the world.
Notes

1 Other francophone novelists are more categorical in their support for the French educational system, for example Mariama Bâ, both in her novel *Une si longue lettre* and in her interview. In the former, Ramatoulaye looks back to her schooldays at the French lycée with nostalgia, p.27. In the latter she has stated that “the masses have to be educated [...] It is vital that the masses are able to read and reflect,” Interview by Harrell-Bond, p.213.

2 Abrams notes that a “motif is a conspicuous element, such as a type of incident, device, reference, or formula which occurs frequently in works of literature. Theme is sometimes used interchangeably with “motif” but the term is more usefully applied to a general concept or doctrine, whether implicit, or asserted, which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader.” M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Seventh Edition (1941; Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), p.170.


5 Stratton’s contention is understandable as she only deals with one francophone woman writer, Mariama Bâ, whose writing is available in translation. Although Bugul’s *Le Baobab fou* is also available in translation, the trope is not so marked in this novel as it is in its sequel, *Cendres et braises*, which has not been translated.

6 Ogunyemi has referred to the “silence on or intolerance of lesbians.” According to her, African writers reject lesbianism unlike African American women writers, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, p.133. She cites Rebeka Njau’s *Ripples in the Pool* (1975), Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* (1975) and Bessie Head’s *A Question of Power* (1974).

7 According to Nfah-Abbenyi, homosexuality is “something whose existence is sometimes “known” but heavily repressed and rarely spoken or spoken about,” *Gender in African Women’s Writing*, p.29.


9 *Femmes rebelles*, p.124. Derek Wright, in his discussion of Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, suggests something similar when he states that “[t]he novel’s tropology of anorexia and bulimia refers to the uncategorizable in female experience in a patriarchal society and indicates a position (hitherto a marginal one) in which African femininity resides rather than a definition of that femininity, definition having been an exclusively male prerogative up until now,” “Regurgitating Colonialism,” pp.119-20.

10 *Cazenave, Femmes rebelles*, p.209.

11 In Beyala’s latest novel, *La Petite fille du révebere* [The Little Girl of the Lamppost] (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998), the young protagonist of the title is constantly searching for the identity of her absent father.


13 For details of publishing in Africa, see Philip G. Altach, ed., *Publishing and Development in the Third World* (London: H. Zell, 1992). To my knowledge there has been no study published of this kind devoted to women’s publishing.


15 Emecheta has also commented that she gives books free to libraries in Nigeria, *Jussawalla and Dasenbrock, Interviews with Writers of the Post-colonial World*, p.92. Gareth Griffiths discusses the way in which Ngugi’s *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*, in their Gikuyu version, were read aloud to
non-literate Kenyans. Griffiths cites Ngugi's claim in the preface to Matigari that "peasants in Central Kenya were whispering and talking about a man called Matigari who was roaming the whole country making demands about truth and justice. There were orders for his immediate arrest, but the police discovered that Matigari was only a fictional character in a book of the same name. In February 1987, the police raided all the bookshops and seized every copy of the novel." African Literatures in English, p.215.

16 "I'm not a (Western) feminist but..." – A Review of Recent Critical Writings on African Women's Literature," Research in African Literatures 29.3 (1998): 171-189, p.171. All the works reviewed by Harrow are by female critics.

17 Obvious exceptions to this are Vincent Odmatten's The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo and Jean-Marie Volet's work La Parole aux Africaines. Additionally, Volet promotes African women's writing through his website located at The University of Western Australia (http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/FEMEChome.html).

18 See especially Stratton's Introduction entitled "Exclusionary Practices" in Contemporary African Literature, pp.1-19. It may also be the case that responses such as Stratton's to male critiques of women's writing has had the unintended and unfortunate conclusion of dissuading them from tackling women's texts.


20 See chapter 1, endnote 126.
APPENDIX

Biobibliography of Major Women Writers Studied

Anglophone Writers:

Aidoo, Ama Ata

Aidoo was born in 1942 in the Fanti town, Aeadzi Gyakor, in central Ghana. She attended high school in Cape Coast and received her BA in English with honours in 1964 from the University of Ghana. She has taught, lectured and studied at numerous universities in West and Central Africa, as well as in the United States. She held the position of Minister of Education from 1983 to 1984. After spending many years in Harare, Zimbabwe, she currently resides in Ghana with her daughter.

She has written poetry, plays and novels. Among her works are two plays: *Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964) and *Anowa* (1969). Two of her many short story collections are: *No Sweetness Here* (1970), *Someone Talking to Sometime* (1985) Her only novels to date are: *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977) and *Changes - A Love Story* (1991).¹

Dangarembga, Tsitsi

Tsitsi Dangarembga was born in 1959 in Mutoko, Zimbabwe. At the age of two, she moved with her parents to England, where she remained until 1965. She completed her secondary education upon returning to Rhodesia. In 1977 Dangarembga went to Cambridge to study medicine but she abandoned her studies three years later and returned to Zimbabwe. She worked as a copywriter for a local advertising company for two years and later earned a Bachelor's degree in psychology at the University of Zimbabwe. At university she became involved in the drama club and started writing for the stage. In 1983 she wrote and directed the production *The Lost of the Soil.* She became a member of the theatre group Zambuko, and was involved in two successful plays. During the same period she began writing prose. In 1985 her short story *The Letter* was published in Sweden. In 1987 she wrote a play entitled *She No Longer Weeps* which was published in Harare.

*Nervous Conditions* (1989) is her first and only novel to date and was awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa Section) in 1989. She has also written the story on which the film *Neria* (1992) was based. She has also studied film production in Germany. Currently she is working on a second novel, entitled *A Plague of Butterflies.* In 1997 the film *Everyone's Child,* directed by Dangarembga, won two prizes for the best film in the Pan African Film and Television Festival in Burkina Faso.

¹ Asterisked novels feature in thesis.
Emecheta, Buchi

Florence Onyeuchi Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1944 of Ibuza background. After attending primary and secondary schools in Lagos, she won a scholarship to the elite Methodist Girls' High School. Emecheta married Sylvester Onwordi and in 1962 she went to join him in London. In England the couple had five children and the marriage ended acrimoniously. Emecheta studied for an Honours degree in Sociology and a Masters degree in Philosophy at the University of London. She has founded the publishing house Ogwugwu Afor in London and has worked for the British Library and as a youth worker.


Likimani, Muthoni

Likimani was born in 1926 and brought up at the Kahuhia Mission, Murang’a District, Kenya. Her early life as the daughter of one of the first Kenyan Anglican church ministers, Rev. Levi Gachanja, was influential on her development as a writer, particularly in her first novel, *They Shall Be Chastized.* She trained as a teacher at the then Government African Teachers College at Kabete, Nairobi. In 1958 she was offered a four months study tour by the British Council and attended short courses on public welfare. She later joined the Institute of Education at London University where she studied Community Development and Adult Education. In 1960 she studied Tropic Nutrition and how to apply it in developing countries at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. She has also studied radio programme production and journalism at the Israel Broadcasting Services in Jerusalem.

She has been employed as a teacher at Kahuhla Girls School and later at various other schools. In England she did part-time broadcasting of women’s programmes at the BBC in London. She has travelled in Kenya teaching nutrition. Until her retirement she ran her own Public Relations Consultancy. Likimani has an active interest in women’s issues and has represented Kenya at various international and United Nations seminars. She has three children and several grandchildren.

on the life of children in Kenya. A non-fictional work, Women of Kenya: In the Decade of Development (1985), was produced for the United Nations Women’s Conference held in Nairobi in 1985 and outlines the importance of women in a wide range of roles. Her works dealing with the Mau Mau focus on the women’s contribution – she believes it is important for the younger generation to know about such a contribution, as it is generally ignored. She states that the women’s movement in Kenya concentrates more on the uneducated women than the educated women.

**Maraire, Nozipo**

Maraire was born in Mangula, Zimbabwe. She holds degrees in Biology and Medicine from Harvard and Columbia Universities respectively, and is currently completing her Neurosurgical specialisation and a Masters in Public Health at Yale. She has a home both in Zimbabwe and in New Haven where she has a gallery of African art.

Her first and only novel to date, *Zenzele: A Letter for my Daughter* was published in 1996.

**Nwapa, Flora**

Flora Nwapa was born in 1931 in Oguta, Eastern Nigeria and died in 1993 in Enugu, Nigeria. She was educated at the University of Ibadan, receiving her BA in 1957, and also earned a degree in Education from the University of Edinburgh (1958). She was the education officer in Calabar in 1959 and a teacher at Queen’s School in Enugu from 1959 until 1962. For the next two years she was an administration officer at the University of Lagos. She also worked in various government Ministries, taking a post in the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare for the East-Central State (1970-75). She founded the publishing house Tana Press, which publishes adult fiction, and Flora Nwapa and Co., which publishes children’s fiction, in Enugu, Nigeria. She was married and had three children.

Vera, Yvonne

Vera was born in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe in 1964.

Her publications have consistently won awards: a collection of short stories, *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals?* (1992), was short-listed for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Africa Region) as was *Nehanda* (1993) and *Without a Name* (1994) and this prize was finally won by her novel, *Under the Tongue* (1996). Her latest novel is *Butterfly Burning* (1998). She has a DPhil from York University, Toronto, and is at present Director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo.

Francophone Writers:

Aka, Marie-Gisèle

Aka was born in 1971 in Beyrouth, Lebanon. She left this country before she was one-year old with her family. She lives in the Ivory Coast and has two children. She is fluent in French, English, Spanish and Russian. She qualified as a Chartered Accountant.

She has to her name a collection of poetry entitled *Malaises*, and a collection of short stories, both of which are unpublished. *Les Haillons de l'amour* (1994) is her first published novel.

Beyala, Calixthe

Calixthe Beyala was born in 1961 in Douala, Cameroon. She was separated from her mother at five years of age and raised by an elder sister in the ghettos of Douala, where she attended primary school and high school, winning a scholarship. She left for Paris at 17 where she studied for her *baccalauréat*. After living in Spain for several years with her husband, she studied for a BA in France. She is presently divorced, lives in Paris with her two children and earns her living by writing.

for what has been considered the sensationalist nature of some of her novels, but also for plagiarism in *Le Petit Prince de Belleville* and *Les Honneurs perdus*.

**Bugul, Ken (Mariétou Mbaye)**

Mbaye, *alias* Ken Bugul, was born in 1948 in the Ndoucoumane, a region in Saloum (Senegal). She went to primary school in her village and to the secondary Lycée Malick Sy de thiès in Senegal. After a year at the University of Dakar she obtained a grant to study in Belgium. Returning to Senegal in 1980 she married an elderly marabout who died a few months later. She has worked in the area of family planning in Dakar and is currently working for an international organisation in Brazzaville (Congo).

She has written two autobiographical novels, *Le Baobab fou* (1982) and *Cendres et braises* (1994).

**Keïta, Fatou**

Keïta was born in the Ivory Coast where she currently resides. She is a *Docteur es-Lettres* in Anglo-Saxon studies and she teaches English literature at the University of Cocody in Abidjan.

*Rebelle* (1998) is her first and only novel to date for adults. She has also written several books for children: *Le Petit garçon bleu* (1996) which won several prizes, *La Voleuse de sourires* (1996) and *Sinabani, la petite dernière* (1997).

**Mpoudi Ngolle, Evelyne**

Mpoudi Ngolle was born in 1953 in Yaoundé, Cameroon and in 1979 obtained a *doctorat de troisième siècle en lettres modernes* from the University of Bordeaux III. She is a High School teacher and currently holds the post of a French Teaching Inspector in Yaoundé. She has three children.

She began writing in 1976 but was unable to find a publisher for her first novel, *Sacrée polygamie*. Her second novel, *Sous la cendre le feu,* was published in 1990.

**Rawiri, Angèle Ntyugwetondo**

Angèle Rawiri was born in Port-Gentil, Gabon in 1954 and is the first published woman novelist in her country. Her father was a civil servant and her mother died when she was a child. She worked for several years as a translator/interpreter for the Gabon National Oil/Petroleum Company. She has one daughter and is currently living in Paris.

**Sow Fall, Aminata**

Aminata Sow Fall was born in Saint-Louis, Senegal in 1941. She was educated in Dakar. In Paris she studied for a degree at the Sorbonne (Lettres Modernes) as well as studying to be an Interpreter. She married in 1963 and abandoned these studies, concentrating on gaining a teaching diploma in Lettres Modernes. Later she returned to Senegal and worked as a teacher for several years. Having held the position of Directrice des Lettres et de la Propriété Intellectuelle, she resigned in 1988 to write full-time. That year she also founded the Centre Africain d'Animation et d'Échanges Culturels (CAEC), a non-profit organisation which seeks to foster intellectual, literary and cultural debate. Her novels consistently focus on social issues and the loss of moral values. She is reluctant to disclose the number of children she has had for fear of bad luck.


**Tadjo, Véronique**

Tadjo was born in 1955 in Paris but raised in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. Her primary and secondary education took place in Abidjan where she also attended the Ivory Coast National University, gaining an Arts degree. She then studied for a Masters and a Doctorate at the Sorbonne on Black American Civilisation. She has travelled widely in the United States, the United Kingdom, Mexico and the west coast of Africa. She currently lives in London with her husband and children.

Collaborative Projects:

Aman

Aman was born in Somalia and is the teller of the oral history *Aman* (1994) to the American anthropologist, Virginia Lee Barnes, whom she met when she was living in the United States. After the latter's illness and early death, the American Janice Boddy, in conjunction with Aman, was responsible for the book’s final editing.

Dirie, Waris

Waris Dirie was born into a nomadic life in Somalia and has recounted the story of her life in her autobiography, *Desert Flower* (1998).


**PRIMARY TEXTS: FRANCOPHONE**


**SECONDARY TEXTS:**


BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY TEXTS: ANGLOPHONE


**PRIMARY TEXTS: FRANCOPHONE**


SECONDARY TEXTS:


