

# AFRICAN WOMEN AND FORBIDDEN GROUNDS: FEMALE SEXUALITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how female conditioning and sexual repression affect the woman's sense of self, womanhood, identity and her place in society. It argues that the woman's body is at the core of the many sites of gender struggles/politics. Accordingly, the woman's body must be decolonised for her to attain true emancipation. On the one hand, this study identifies the grave consequences of sexual repression, how it robs women of their freedom to choose whom to love or marry, the freedom to seek legal redress against sexual abuse and terror, and how it hinders their quest for self-determination. On the other hand, it underscores the need to give women sexual freedom that must be respected and enforced by law for the overall good of society.

**Keywords:** decolonization of the woman's body; female conditioning; female self-actualisation; female sexuality; patriarchy; sexual freedom; sexual repression

## INTRODUCTION

Patriarchy places innumerable debilitating taboos on women's paths to freedom and self-determination. Patriarchal taboos make the woman's life a journey through a minefield. Such taboos – forbidden grounds – derive from gender myths

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which condition women's perception of themselves and the world, and limit their opportunities. Female conditioning therefore is one of patriarchy's strongest weapons against women. It makes women afraid of themselves, who they truly are, who they want to be, their true individual thoughts and feelings, their identity-impulses and their personal aspirations. Thus, women are conditioned to be what society (indeed men) wants them to be. As Simone de Beauvoir perspicuously asserts:

One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine. (1952, 249)

In other words, the human female called woman is a cultural construct, designed by men to serve men's best interests and purposes as a servant or a chattel. The woman's bondage is seen in the way she is denied fundamental rights: social, political and economic. As important as these rights maybe, a woman needs the freedom to own herself and her body first to be able to enjoy other rights and exercise the power associated with such rights. It is clear to me that a woman's body is her territory, and for her to be truly free and independent she must have sovereignty over it. It is only when this is achieved that the confidence, courage and moral integrity to redefine herself, determine her personhood/subjectivity and fight for socio-economic and political rights will receive an unprecedented boost and become the unstoppable force necessary for gender balance, justice and equity. Insofar as women remain the properties of others (fathers, husbands, lovers and even mothers or relations who sell or possess them in the name of marriage), such women cannot be said to be free. Hence, there is need to decolonize the woman's body. As Andrea Dworkin (1995, 238) aptly puts it, 'every area of conflict regarding the rights of women ultimately boils down to the same issue: what are women for; to what use should women be put – sexually and reproductively.' Her answer to the above questions is quite insightful. According to her, 'the possession of women's bodies by men is considered to be the correct and proper use of women.... The sexual colonization of women's bodies is a material reality: men control the sexual and reproductive uses of women's bodies'. (ibid, 239)

Thus a woman's right over her body is a key factor in her quest for freedom, self-determination and dignity. Sexual freedom is part of a larger scheme of gender politics which underscores the struggle between men and women for control in spheres of influence. Male supremacy is often exercised over female sexuality. Most women neither own themselves (their bodies, time, money and other material resources) nor the men in their lives (husbands or lovers) – men do not surrender their bodies and resources to women, the way they force women to surrender theirs through patriarchal laws.

It is now a cliché to say that women are made to be seen, not heard. But there is a need to stress that of all the silences imposed on women, sexual repression is perhaps the most harmful and atrocious. Women are conditioned to be ashamed of expressing their sexuality, of exercising their sexual rights; most women have general sexual guilt feelings or submit to the psychology of sex-negation. The repression of women's sexual freedom due to patriarchal taboos and traditions has grave consequences. Most women are led to believe that it is natural for men to abuse them sexually. Many who know better than to believe that sexual abuse is part of men's right still keep silent when they suffer abuses such as rape or other sex-related violations, for fear of stigmatisation. Sexual repression in women therefore provides a cover for men who abuse women sexually and violate their humanity. Why should rape or sexual harassment be a taboo subject for women if men brazenly indulge in it? This is one of the many injustices of patriarchal double standards.

Obnoxious cultural practices have conditioned women to be inhibited, ashamed of and/ or afraid to express their sexuality or demand sexual rights. For example, female circumcision is targeted at reducing the woman's capacity for sexual pleasure: in patriarchal reasoning this simply means *taming* the woman and eliminating any chances of her being *promiscuous*. Conversely, male circumcision, apart from religious and aesthetic purposes, is aimed at enhancing the man's capacity for sexual pleasure – and through socialisation and acculturation the man is given the licence for sexual adventure and promiscuity. Yet, it is the erring man who polices, accuses and condemns the woman for sexual misconduct, and places strict moral codes and severe sanctions on the woman who is expected, ironically, to be a voiceless, unthinking angel. Such gender-based double standards and their concomitant injustices have been of great concern to feminists.

## TRADITION, FEMALE SEXUALITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION

African women writers have created works that represent the various manifestations of sexual repression. In Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970) which are set in traditional Igbo society, we see that the patriarchal authoritarian culture is so absolute that the women think it is natural and in accordance with the law of God and of society for women not to have certain rights and privileges. In fact, through socialisation, women are made agents of patriarchy who promote, propagate, and enforce laws, cultural practices and taboos that victimise and dehumanise them.

*Efuru* is beautiful, virtuous, loving, caring, resourceful, successful, distinguished and almost perfect. Even though her elopement with Adizua when he had not paid (and could not pay) her bride price is considered a daring act that marks her independent-mindedness and radicalism, *Efuru* is not just a victim of patriarchy, she is also defined and limited by it – especially its sexual repression. One of the measures men take

to ensure that women make themselves available for men's pleasures and interests is by assigning women the roles of wifehood and motherhood: two traditional roles through which womanhood is determined in patriarchal culture. And women are conditioned to desperately strive to fulfil these roles and become 'women' or face shame, stigmatisation and the burden of being despised as unfulfilled, non-men-non-women, and complete failures.

This is clearly demonstrated in the life of Efuru. She is so desperate to get married that after a fortnight's courtship she agrees to marry Adizua without the dowry and threatens to drown herself in the lake if he does not marry her. Despite her virtues, love and sacrifices, Adizua becomes abusive and unfaithful to Efuru as soon as she gives birth. Adizua is nowhere to be found when the child takes ill. Even when the child dies he does not come. When Efuru hears that her husband has married another woman, she packs her things and returns to her father's house.

In time, she remarries. Her marriage to Eneberi is blissful, yet he is unfaithful to her. This conversation between Eneberi and his friend, Sunday Eneke, is quite revealing.

'How many children have you?' Sunday asked innocently.

'I have a boy, but he is not the son of my wife. My wife has no child.'

'I am sorry. And does your wife know about the boy?'

'I haven't told her about the boy.'

'You haven't told her. Why?'

'I haven't the courage. If she had a child it would be easy to confess to her. I am sure it is going to upset her. You see it is one of those things we men cannot avoid. I went to Ndoni, met this girl, and the result is a bouncing baby boy. I have not told my mother either, though I know she will be very glad.' (1966, 190-191)

Efuru is childless, and because womanhood (fulfilment, a woman's destiny) is tied to motherhood, her greatest desire is to be a mother, to have a child. Though she is a good wife (faithful, loving and caring), a successful trader and a good citizen whose economic prosperity is a blessing to the poor and needy in her community, she feels inadequate and unfulfilled because of her childlessness. But Efuru would not have felt so empty and unfulfilled if patriarchal culture had allowed her to determine herself, and define her womanhood outside of the phallogocentric order.

Patriarchal ideology distorts the woman's sense of self and conditions her subconscious to accept male superiority and domination which inferiorise and subjugate her. In *Efuru*, this leads to the character's self-abnegation and self-sacrifice. Eneberi marries a second wife, Nkoyeni, and brings home the child he has had out of wedlock. Efuru accepts all these selflessly; it is Nkoyeni who insists that the boy must be sent away. For this and her insistence that Eneberi must tell the truth about

the rumour of his crime and consequent imprisonment at Onicha, she is dubbed a bad and troublesome woman. In fact, it is Efuru herself who decides to let Eneberi have Ogea, a little girl who lives with her and calls her mother, as a third wife in order to humble or spite Nkoyeni. But ironically, when Efuru takes ill, her husband accuses her of adultery without so much as investigating the allegation. He tells her, 'Efuru, my wife, the gods are angry with you because you are guilty of adultery and unless you confess, you will die. So you should confess to me and live' (ibid, 216).

Eneberi's mother, who reports Efuru's alleged adultery to Eneberi for appropriate action against her, is happy that her son has a son out of wedlock. Besides, Eneberi, who wants Efuru to confess to him, seek his forgiveness and live, is the one who is actually guilty of adultery. Why are the gods not angry with him? Hence, Nwapa exposes the hypocritical double standards of patriarchy and the immorality of patriarchal sexual laws, which are not aimed at social morality but male supremacy. In fact, patriarchal culture is built on a selective justice principle that is anti-women, anti-progress and unjust.

Why does Efuru not protest against Eneberi's infidelity? It is because custom forbids her from doing so. She believes it is part of his rights and privileges as a man; she believes her husband is her master, her god, whereas she is merely one of his possessions.

Wifehood and motherhood are duties imposed on the woman in order to colonise her body and labour, and therefore limit her destiny. Many women are not allowed to be anything outside these traditional roles which, in turn, encourage servitude. Similarly, polygamy is another cultural practice that inferiorises the woman, subjugates her so that she is forced to accept that she is too small or insignificant to have 'one whole man' to herself, whereas it makes a man a thin god, almost above the laws of the land, a super being too big to be confined to only one woman. As is evident in Achebe's *Things fall apart* (1958), and *Arrow of God* (1964), Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), and *Idu* (1970), Okpewho's *The victims* (1970), Emecheta's *The joys of motherhood* (2008), Ba's *So long a letter* (1981), and *Scarlet song* (1986), etc the woman's dignity and rights are abused in polygamous relationship. Polygamy imposes unhealthy, harmful rivalry on women as they compete for their husband's attention, as in Okpewho's *The victims* (1970). Silence is no less harmful to women who suffer the many pains of betrayal and abandonment in polygamy as depicted in Emecheta's *The joys of motherhood* where Nwokocha Agbadi's first wife dies of heart attack following years of male insensitivity and hurtful silence in a polygamous marriage. While she waits at the door, as she is instructed by her sick husband when Ona his concubine visits him, she hears him moaning and groaning. Presuming that her husband is in excruciating pain, her heart aches with anxiety for her suffering husband. When she is eventually allowed into the room, her husband callously tells her there is nothing to worry about as he is only giving his concubine sexual pleasure. The first wife does not survive the shock and humiliation of this experience. She dies, but Nwokocha Agbadi goes unpunished.

Society fails to recognize the fact that a woman's humanity and sexual rights are abused in polygamy when she has to compete with other women for access to her husband's body, when she has to wait her turn to sleep with her husband as a wife. And sometimes when the man marries a younger wife, the older wife is abandoned not just in terms of material responsibilities, she is also sex starved, her sexual needs are not attended to, and yet she is not allowed to have extra-marital sex (or quit the marriage, especially in some Muslim societies where women who leave their marriages are killed in the name of protecting the honour of their families). Fafa Margaret Nutsukpo (2010) exposes the barbarism and criminality of the ignoble tradition called honour killing in a collection of poems entitled *Teardrops from heaven*. Whereas women are confined and not allowed 'to step outside the boundaries of marital sexual exclusivity' (Lawson 1988, 3), patriarchal culture is permissive of male promiscuity and men therefore often seek self-fulfilment, power and supremacy in sexual relationships in and outside marriage. Thus, to most men sex or adultery is a form of recreation. But such men cannot stand the thought of sharing their wives with other men. Writing of the Western world, Lawson states that 'adultery has always been a more serious problem for the adulterous married woman than for the adulterous married man, her punishment being greatly more severe than his' (ibid, 31). The situation is worse for African women, and in most African societies there is no punishment for adulterous men; even where court marriages ought to protect the woman's sexual rights, marital laws are hardly ever enforced. Punishment for the adulterous woman is sometimes death. Efurū, for instance, is accompanied by selected members of her age-group to the shrine of the goddess Utuosu, to swear her innocence. According to her, 'There I swore by the name of Utuosu, she should kill me if I committed adultery. She should kill me if since I married Eneberi any man in our town, in Onicha, Ndoni, Akiri, or anywhere I had been, had seen my thighs' (Nwapa 1966, 220). But Eneberi is free from any punishment whatsoever.

In Nwapa's *Idu*, the marriage between Idu and Adiewere is a happy one. There is mutual respect and gender complementarity, but they are childless. Due to Idu's inability to meet the motherhood criterion of the patriarchal conception of womanhood, she is unfulfilled, just like Efurū. Children are so central to the traditional African society created in *Idu* that Nwasobi (which means 'a child gladdens the heart') declares: 'What we are praying for is children. What else do we want if we have children' (1970, 150) In accordance with custom and social expectations, Idu persuades her husband to marry another woman who can give him children. She does this to avoid being called a selfish, wicked or evil woman as her society forbids a childless woman from laying claims to her husband, or even her womanhood. Idu conforms to tradition and Adiewere marries a second wife ('the small wife' as Nwasobi calls her). This second marriage proves a disaster as the new wife makes life miserable for both Idu and Adiewere. Eventually the small wife runs off with

another man and Idu gives birth to a baby boy. Yet Onyemuru calls Idu a dangerous woman for telling her husband not to marry another woman.

‘I did not say Adiewere must not marry again, Onyemuru.’

‘You said so. If you did not say so, he would have married another wife. You have already driven away the second wife he married, such a good wife. We don’t do things like that here. You are a dangerous woman. Our people don’t act like that. A woman like you should marry many wives for her husband. Don’t you go on as you are, it is not good.’ (ibid, 90)

The above conversation clearly shows how socialisation produces passivity and self-negation in women. Idu, like most traditional women, does not want to be dubbed a dangerous, bad woman. Onyemuru’s remarks make her so unhappy that she does not eat. At night, a distraught Idu begs her husband: ‘I only want you to marry another wife. I don’t want to be called a bad woman any more’ (ibid, 91). She does not leave her husband alone until he promises to marry another wife. Efuru and Idu are not alone in this patriarchal cage that denies women freedom. Emecheta’s (2008) Nnuego suffers a similar fate when she is unable to bear a child in her first marriage. Adimora-Ezeigbo’s (1996) Chieme accepts polygamy, but because she can neither menstruate nor conceive, her husband sends her away saying she is his fellow man, not a woman. These characters represent women who are constructed by men and confined within the patriarchal order. (Chieme, however, later actualises herself outside of marriage). The destiny of such women is tied to their biological make-up or reproductive functions, and their ultimate goals in life, as legislated by patriarchy, are wifehood and motherhood – and of these, motherhood is the ultimate. Of all these characters, Idu is the perfect example of woman as appendage to man. In addition to motherhood being central to her self-definition and fulfilment, she cannot imagine life without her husband. During the eclipse of the sun, which the villagers think portends the end of the world, ‘Idu was there, thinking of the baby she had in her womb. If this was the end, it meant so much to her. It meant she was not going to enjoy motherhood in this world’ (1970, 82). Later she has a son. But when her husband takes ill and dies, her world ends; she forgets about herself and her little son and resolves to die, which she does. The significance of her death is that it shows not just the depth of her love for her husband but, more importantly, her lack of individuality or subjectivity. She is economically prosperous but psychologically enslaved and totally dependent. Women such as Efuru, Idu and Nnuego are unfortunate victims of patriarchal standards which result in self-negation, denying women the right to self-determination, the freedom to be themselves and pursue their individual goals and aspirations. Such women fit into what Woolf (1993, 357) describes as the ‘Angel in the House’:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it - in short she was so constituted that she

never had a mind or wishes of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all - I need not to say it - she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty.

Modern women want to be themselves, women and human, not anybody's angels. They reject silence and docility as virtues. Accordingly, they deconstruct collective identities based on gender stereotypes and prefer to construct individual identities which project their dignity, respectability, freedom and power. More and more African women authors resist, in their creative works, cultural practices that produce erring men and virtuous women who are victims of men's excesses. They create modern women who want the same freedom as men to be virtuous as well as erring, the freedom to be human. The pure, voiceless and powerless angels are giving way to truly independent, and powerful women who are informed and assertive, women who are in charge of their passions and dreams. This transformation is mainly due to the forces of modernity.

This transformation in the consciousness of African women is portrayed in the shifts in gender/feminist concerns across generations. Whereas women were inherited like mere furniture by their late husbands' brothers or sons in the past as depicted in the levirate marriages between Baroka and Sadiku in Soyinka's *The lion and the jewel* (1998), Lejoka Brown and Mama Rashida in Ola Rotimi's *Our husband has gone mad again* (1999), Adah's mother and her father's brother in Buchi Emecheta's *Second-class citizen* (1994), this dehumanising practice has been challenged by later generations of women. In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye resists this dehumanising custom after her husband dies and her late husband's good-for-nothing brother, Tamsir, comes to inherit her. Because of how deeply entrenched and institutionalised this obnoxious practice is, Tamsir comes with Mawdo and the Imam. Fortunately, though Ramatoulaye does not divorce her husband when he betrays her by marrying her daughter's friend, she is a modern woman who has learnt the hard way that docility is no longer a woman's virtue. After thirty years of silence and harassment, her voice explodes violently as she tongue-lashes Tamsir:

Ah, yes! Your strategy is to get in before any other suitor, to get in before Mawdo, the faithful friend, who has more qualities than you and who also, according to custom, can inherit the wife. You forget that I have a heart, a mind, that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. (1989, 58)

Similarly, in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The last of the strong ones* (1996), Onyekozuru refuses to marry her late husband's son, brother, or relation, an act forbidden by tradition. In Emecheta's *Second Class-Citizen* (1994), whereas Adah's mother is inherited by her father's brother, Adah not only chooses her own husband, she also ensures that the outrageous bride price of five hundred pounds demanded by her family is not paid at all. It is taboo for a woman to marry without a bride



price being paid, but Adah does not want to be sold as a commodity by her greedy relatives.

In Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (1993), the heroine, Esi, is a true radical. She defines herself outside of the phallogocentric order and therefore is not limited by patriarchal laws; instead she disrupts patriarchal culture. Unlike Efurū, Idu or Nnuego, she does not place a premium on marriage. For this, she is considered abnormal. When she gets married, she decides that her girl child is enough contrary to the tradition of African women being desperate to have many children, especially male children. She is more educated and wealthier than her husband, Oko, who lives in her house. Though she is a good cook, she avoids such wifely duties. Most importantly, Esi does not believe her body belongs to her husband. As she sees it, her body belongs to her and nobody has a right to have sex with her without her consent. Thus, when her husband forces himself on her, she feels defiled and violated. It is an act she rightly calls marital rape. But knowing that marital rape is unheard of in Africa and that people may think she is crazy if she accuses her husband of rape, she decides to divorce him. He packs up and leaves her house. Her actions may seem extreme, especially considering her later misadventure when she enters into a polygamous marriage that drains her happiness and causes her a nervous breakdown. But, considering that women are vulnerable to all sorts of horrible sexual violations, it is an important step in the decolonisation of the African woman's body. These violations of the woman's body is so rampant and destructive, that stringent measures must be adopted to curb or eradicate them. As Dworkin (1995, 239) rightly posits:

Rape and prostitution are central contemporary female experiences; women as a class are seen as belonging to men as a class and are systemically kept subservient to men. Married women in most instances have lost sexual and reproductive control of their bodies, which is what it means to be sexual chattel.

There is indeed a great need to grant women control over their bodies and sexuality. Apart from the fact that men's colonisation of women's bodies leads to a violation of their humanity, it also exposes them to the dangers of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, maternal mortality or unwanted and abandoned children who often end up as criminals, prostitutes, etc. For example, it is the many sexual abuses suffered by Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at point zero* (2007) that force her into prostitution, and eventually to commit murder. As a little girl, she is sexually abused by her uncle. As a young teenager, she suffers a traumatic circumcision which makes her frigid. Later she is married off for money (by the same uncle) to a sick, ill-tempered, smelly old man who abuses her body and mind in every possible way. When she escapes from the prison called marriage, she falls into the hands of Bayoumi, who pretends to rescue her but turns her into a sex slave, first for himself, and later for his sadomasochistic friend who brutalises her and calls her names such as 'slut' and 'bitch' simply because

she says yes when he asks if she feels pleasure as he rapes her. This distorted sense of male supremacy recurs when Firdaus later takes to prostitution as a form of revolt against society and as a means of self-determination. One of her customers, Di'aa, tells her that because she is a prostitute she is not respectable. Similarly, in the course of having sexual intercourse with Firdaus, the Arab prince asks repeatedly, 'Do you feel pleasure?', and each time Firdaus says yes, he inflicts more violent pain on her until she can no longer stand the violence. Having stopped him, she is so angry that she tears the money he pays her into little pieces. The kind of statement made by Di'aa, a male prostitute, and the outrage expressed by both the rapist and the Arab prince (another male prostitute) who consider it an abomination for a woman to enjoy sexual pleasure are products of the patriarchal double standards which have led to the masculinisation of sex. It is important to note that the need to own her body is at the centre of every woman's struggles, as demonstrated through Firdaus' experiences. In the eyes of men as well as the government, the woman's body is a plaything, an object of pleasure which, perhaps, most men can have whenever and wherever they please, and on their own terms. But Firdaus disagrees. When policemen try to force her to sleep with some important men, especially high-ranking government officials, she refuses. They arrest and detain her in order to break her and make her submit to their intimidation and force. She insists: 'My body was my property alone, but the land of our country was theirs to own' (ibid, 99). Thus she takes the government to court and wins the case. But the pimp Marzouk, who has been exploiting her for some time, thinks it is unimaginable and impossible for a woman to own her body. Hence, when Firdaus turns down his offer of protection or marriage to him, if she pleases, the following conversation ensues:

'I don't see the need for you to marry me as well. It's enough that you take what I earn. My body at least is mine'.

He went on like a successful businessman: 'I'm in business. My capital is women's bodies and I don't mix work and love together.' (ibid, 101)

When Firdaus makes it clear that she wants to be the mistress of her own life, Marzouk turns violent and tries to kill her. She stabs him to death with the knife he wants to kill her with.

Firdaus' experiences are reminiscent of those of the five women sentenced to life in prison for killing their husbands in Bessie Head's short story, 'The collector of treasures' (1977). Head graphically depicts the heart-rending dilemma immanent in female sexuality: sexual pleasure and sexual terror are often in constant contention in women's lives. According to Vance (1984, 327):

The tension between sexual danger and sexual pleasure is a powerful one in women's lives. Sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure and agency. To focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence

and oppression ignores women's experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live.

As stated earlier, so many women all over the world do not experience sex as a pleasurable act, rather they have terrible, indelible memories of sexual pain and violence. To such women, sex either marks their defilement or shameful, agonizing surrender to men's domination. They submit to sex, especially in marriage, because tradition demands it. Other women who have experienced both sexual pleasure and violence sometimes suffer some form of erotic disorder due to the alarm bell triggered by past traumatic sexual terrors such as rape. Yet many women who do not have sexual disorders such as frigidity, vaginal anaesthesia or orgasm inhibition consider sex repugnant. Malleson (1962, 62) attributes many sexual inhibitions to 'the general social background of feminine upbringing', adding that 'everything in training dissuades a girl from claiming her natural sexuality: quite early in childhood she realizes that renunciation meets with parental approval'.

All the factors outlined above coalesce to make some women believe that sexual pleasure is exclusively a male prerogative. In 'The collector of treasures', Head exposes the trauma of women who suffer male insensitivity and violence in their sexual lives. Of the six women who are central to the story, only Kenalepe enjoys sexual pleasure and looks forward to it. Having been abandoned with three children by her husband for eight years, the heroine, Dikeledi, is advised by her friend, Kenalepe, to find another man. Because she thinks having a man in her life will only bring her trouble, she refuses, saying that all she really cares about is sending her eldest son to school. It is subjugation and insufferable agonies that force women to abdicate or sacrifice themselves for others and project their dreams and happiness onto their children.

'I mean,' said Kenalepe, 'we are also here to make love and enjoy it.'

'Oh I never really cared for it,' the other replied. 'When you experience the worst of it, it just puts you off altogether.'

'What do you mean?' Kenalepe asked, wide-eyed.

'I mean it was just jump on and jump off and I used to wonder what it was all about. I developed a dislike for it.'

'... Oh, if you knew what it was really like, you would long for it, I can tell you! I sometimes think I enjoy that side of life far too much.' (Head 1977, 96)

After eight years of cruel abandonment during which he accuses his wife of adultery – even as he philanders and lives with another man's wife as his concubine – Garesego returns like an arrogant king to boss Dikeledi around and gratify his insatiable sexual desires in order to massage his bruised ego. The humiliation is so much for Dikeledi that she cuts off his genitals. Of the five women who receive life

sentence for killing their husbands, Dikeledi and Kebonye did it by mutilating their husbands' genitals – the penis is the instrument of violence, of man's oppressive authority in the eyes of these women. Kebonye recounts her experience of sexual terror thus:

Our men do not think that we need tenderness and care. You know my husband used to kick me between the legs when he wanted that. I once aborted with a child, due to this treatment. I could see that there was no way of appealing to him if I felt ill, so I once said to him that if he liked he could keep some other women as well because I couldn't manage to satisfy all his needs. Well, he was an education-officer and each year he used to suspend seventeen male teachers for making school girls pregnant, but he used to do the same. The last time it happened the parents of the girl were very angry and came to report the matter to me. I told them: 'You leave it to me. I have seen enough.' And so I killed him. (ibid, 89-90)

Tragedies such as this underscore the need for women's bodies to be treated as sacred, for women to have sexual freedom and be protected from violation. If a woman is not free to possess her own body, she cannot possess the world, for whatever social, economic, and political gains she makes still belong to the man who owns her. For instance, in Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*, though Adah is far more economically empowered than Francis, her husband, Adah is in fact the breadwinner of Francis' extended family, but she is simply seen and treated as an economic slave and domestic servant. Similarly, in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988), despite Maiguru's academic achievements (she has a Master's degree like her husband) and economic empowerment, she is so docile and invisible that her husband, Babamukuru, collects and spends her salary and society does not recognise any of her achievements. She lives in the shadows of her husband, voiceless and frightened. One of the reasons why her daughter, Nyasha, desperately rebels against her father is to escape being enslaved like her mother. Like Adah and Maiguru, many women surrender their wealth to their husbands, and those who buy valuable property (or properties, as the case may be) do so in their husbands' names according to the dictates of tradition – such women abdicate themselves because patriarchy makes them believe it is a taboo to do otherwise; they are made to believe that they belong to their husbands or the men in their lives.

Due to sexual repression and violence, many women, including those who have up to 8 or even 12 children, do not experience sexual pleasure, much less attain orgasm due to circumcision, inhibition, sexual terror or the insensitivity of the men in their lives (husbands, lovers, close relatives or rapists) whose interest is always to gratify their huge sexual appetites. The woman is not expected to demand sexual satisfaction or show signs of sexual enjoyment. If she does, she risks being considered a wayward person or an outright whore. But women are human – complete, full-blooded and as intensely emotionally endowed as men, if not more.

In patriarchal culture the woman is seen as an economic commodity to be sold to the highest bidder. This often has grave consequences for the woman's self-

determination, selfhood and sense of fulfilment and happiness. Annette Lawson (1988, 29) argues that 'once men vied for possession of a woman's body in order to gain her reproductive and her productive labour'. The situation is still the same in most third-world countries. As Reich (1968, 230) argues in *The function of the orgasm*, 'sexual repression is an essential instrument in the production of economic enslavement'. In Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the gods* (1972), Ogwoma is sold into bondage in the name of marriage when she is forced by her parents to marry Adigwu in order to raise, through her bride price, the money needed to cure her sick brother. When Adigwu dies she revolts against the tradition of levirate, like Ramatoulaye, by refusing to be inherited by her husband's brother. Rather than wait to be handed over to her late husband's brother like a piece of furniture, as decreed by a tradition that gives her neither voice nor choice, she breaks the taboo by becoming pregnant by her dearly beloved Uloko who had lost her to Adigwu because he could not afford the bride price demanded by her parents. The physical and spiritual consequences are tragic for all involved, including the community. In Sutherland's *The marriage of Anansewa* (1987), the trickster, Ananse, turns his daughter, Anansewa, into a commodity contested for by four chiefs. The highest bidder, Chief-Who-Is-Chief, wins the contest and so takes Anansewa, his 'precious possession' as Ananse significantly puts it. Similarly, in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at point zero*, Firdaus is sold to the old and sick Sheikh Mahmoud. And in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The last of the strong ones*, Onyekozuru is the commodity of exchange for a piece of land her father wants from Umeozo, whose children are even older than her. She does not want to marry the old man, but tradition denies her the freedom to challenge her parents and traditional practices. Adimora-Ezeigbo exposes yet another dimension of the woman-as-commodity phenomenon in *Trafficked* (2008), women are deceived, or coaxed into prostitution and trafficked to different countries in Europe where they are turned into money making sex machines. Similarly, in *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), Chika Unigwe exposes how four African women are degraded and dehumanised in Brussels through forced sexual labour. One of the women, Sisi, is murdered by those who control the sex industry oiled by the bodies, honour and humanity of women caught in the powerful web of modern day slavery.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, sexual repression is an important element of sexual politics; and sexual freedom is an important stage in the ongoing process of redeeming the humanity of women. By making women ashamed of their bodies and their sexuality, patriarchal society ingrains in women's psyche and consciousness the shackles of docility which in turn engenders inferiority, voicelessness, self-negation and ultimately servitude. As stated earlier, the woman's body is her territory, and for her to be truly independent and free, she must have sovereignty over it. It is only when this is

achieved that the confidence, courage, and moral integrity needed to redefine herself, determine her personhood/subjectivity and fight for socio-economic and political rights will be unstoppable. Being that the woman's body is at the core of the many sites of gender struggles and politics, the decolonisation of her body is key to her true emancipation. Insofar as women are treated as chattel and made to believe that their bodies – and indeed their lives – belong to other people, the Efurus, the Idus and the Nnuegos will multiply and become role models even to generations yet to be born; the abuses of polygamy, rape, obnoxious and dehumanising widowhood practices will continue, and the many forbidden grounds that constitute shackles and limit women's opportunities and progress will grow and multiply. But when women have sovereignty over their bodies and sexuality, their quest for self-determination will receive unprecedented boosts in all spheres of life. The reason is that each woman needs to own herself, in order to possess the world (the material and spiritual things of life). Each woman needs the freedom to be herself and own herself in order to engage, challenge and overcome the gender/patriarchal forces which subjugate and limit her. Sexual freedom places women on the offensive, gives them agency and underscores their subjectivity.

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