

**Female identity in the Post-Millennial Nigerian Novel: A Study
of Adichie, Atta, and Unigwe**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis project examines the work of three female Nigerian authors: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta and Chika Unigwe. They are part of a growing number of young African writers who are receiving international acclaim and challenging narratives that have long defined the continent in pejorative terms. They question what it means to be female and African in a transcultural, global world but counter discourses that are both restrictive and prescriptive. Their female characters are not imaged in binary terms as either victims or villains. For all three writers, the African story has to be told in its entirety incorporating what some may argue are negative stereotypes but doing so in a manner that examines and undermines those same stereotypes. For the purposes of the thesis, I focus on their first novels: Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Chapter One examines *Purple Hibiscus* and argues that the novel is much more than a coming of age story or, as some critics have posited, an allegory of the postcolonial state. Chapter Two highlights Atta's use of fairly familiar feminist theories but grounds them in the lived realities of the African city. All three authors are concerned with issues of violence and death. Unigwe's novel, which forms the focus of Chapter Three, offers a critical perspective on how both of those themes intersect with the increasing commercialisation of global culture. Her characters are female sex workers whose lives are irrevocably altered by the murder of one of their colleagues. I conclude by arguing that the three novels offer a nuanced if not necessarily new understanding of the various social, economic and political forces that continue to shape the lives of women on the continent.

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Men go abroad to wonder at the height of mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the long course of rivers, the vast compass of the ocean, the circular motion of the stars but they pass by themselves and don't even notice. (St. Augustine)

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INTRODUCTION

“*There are no blacks in Africa*” [italics in original] (Ato Quayson “Obverse Denominations: Africa?” 193).

W.E.B. Du Bois had held high hopes for the twentieth century on the matter of race. Mindful of that, alas, unfinished business, my hope for the twenty-first century is that it will see the first fruits of the balance of stories among the world’s peoples. The twentieth century for all its many faults did witness a significant beginning, in Africa and elsewhere in the so-called Third World, of the process of re-storying peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession. (Chinua Achebe *Home and Exile* 79)

Yes, We Know It’s Christmas

In December 2014, Irish musician and philanthropist, Sir Bob Geldof released a fourth recording of his 1980s hit song, “Do They Know It’s Christmas”. The first initiative was part of Band Aid, a celebrity charity aimed at raising funds to fight “a famine that devastated parts of northern Ethiopia and present day Eritrea between 1983 and 1985” (Lemma para. 1). Geldof re-released the song in 2014 to aid countries and organisations working to stop the spread of Ebola in West Africa. But this time around, Geldof’s efforts were met with harsh criticism from social and political analysts as well as Africans across social media with many highlighting the latent racism in the song whose lyrics include lines such as: “Well tonight we are reaching out and touching you / And bring peace and joy to Africa / Where nothing ever grows / No rain nor rivers flow / Do they know it’s Christmas time at all?” (Geldof and Midge 13-17).¹ The Ebola outbreak began in Guinea in December 2013 and quickly spread to

¹Also see below sources for other critics, bloggers and analysts who address race and geopolitical issues in Geldof’s “Do They Know It’s Christmas:”
Africa is a Country. “Bob Geldof Doesn’t Need to do a #BandAid30 for Ebola. African Musicians Made a Song Already.” 12 Nov. 2014. <<http://africasacountry.com/bob-geldof-doesnt-need-to-do-a-bandaaid30-for-ebola-african-musicians-made-a-song-already/>> 21 Feb. 2015.
Adewunmi, Bim. *The Guardian*. “Bob Geldof is Right: Ebola Must be Stopped. But is the revival of Do They Know It’s Christmas? With Those Lyrics That Haunt Me Year After Year, Really The Best Way to Help?” 11 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/11/band-aid-30-patronising-bob-geldof-ebola-do-they-know-its-christmas>> 22 Feb. 2015.
Dearden, Nick. *The Guardian*. “Ebola Crisis: Three Things Band Aid Should Really Be Singing About.” 11 Nov. 2014. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/11/ebola-africa-band-aid-three-things?CMP=tw_t_gu> 22 Feb. 2015
Murphy, Tom. *The Humanosphere*. “Africans to Geldof: We don’t need another Band Aid solution.” 11 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.humanosphere.org/world-politics/2014/11/africans-geldof-dont-need-another-band-aid-solution/>>22 Feb. 2015.

neighbouring Liberia, and Sierra Leone. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) by July 2015 Ebola has killed about 11,000 people. (Flynn para. 4). Over 28,000 known cases were reported (Fofana para. 2). Despite the grim figures, for some critics, Geldof's song, however, continues to perpetuate stereotypes about Africa. As editor and blogger, Aaron Bady points out:

“Do They Know It's Christmas?” produces a single image of abjection, the fantasy of an “Africa” filled with victims waiting to be saved, the perfect site for white saviors to perform their selfless virtue. It's a song that divides the world quite sharply between “us” and “them.” (Bady para. 3)

The song's video commences with a sequence of a young African woman chronically ill from what is presumed to be Ebola.² She is emaciated and is being carried by two medical staff dressed in Protective Personal Equipment or P.P.E necessary due to the contagious nature of the virus. This is then followed by studio performances with the singers and pop stars involved in the project, most of who are ‘white.’ The image of the woman is reminiscent of equally stark images of starving women and children in Ethiopia during the famine in the 1980s. The song thus not only views Africa as unchanging and primitive but the attitudes it espouses can be traced to complex centuries-old ideologies that have consistently defined Africa as ‘Other’.

Abdullahi Halakhe, a Kenyan policy analyst further argues:

I think the fundamental problem with the “saving” Africa posture is that it is predicated on the notion that Africa/Africans are agency-less, which for me is problematic because it is the continuation of never-ending paternalistic tendencies towards Africa. Also, the idea that Africa needs to be saved in 2014 by washed up C-list pop artists is a perverse example of a

Msimang, Sisonke. *Africa is a Country*. “There is no Ebola here’: What Liberia teaches us about the failures of aid.” 9 Oct. 2014. <http://africasacountry.com/there-is-no-ebola-here-what-liberia-teaches-us-about-the-failures-of-aid/>> 22 Feb. 2015.

Sykes, Tom. *The Daily Beast*. “Do They Know It's Time to Stop Band Aid?” 11 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/11/22/do-they-know-it-s-time-to-stop-band-aid.html>> 22 Feb. 2015.

²Please see video reference for Geldof's “Do They Know It's Christmas:” Geldof, Bob and Ure, Midge. “Do They Know It's Christmas.” *Band Aid 30*. November 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7jyVHocTk>>

messiah complex. For instance, Nigeria and Senegal had outbreaks of Ebola, and they dealt with them effectively. DR Congo has had a couple of Ebola outbreaks, and they've dealt with them. But this is hardly mentioned in the hysteria-fuelled reportage about Ebola. Don't get me wrong; in the three worst affected countries the impact of Ebola has been devastating. But I'd be hard pressed to think a Geldof-led charity song is the way to address it. (Halakhe, in Malone "We Got This Bob Geldof" para. 3)

One could of course argue that Geldof's song does little harm but in fact brings global attention to an obviously difficult and dire situation. In an interview reported by *The Telegraph* newspaper, Geldof himself offers a similar position:

You forget that I came along in 1976 and we were part of the punk thing. I love disruption. And when it's politically focused, it's very powerful. [...] You focus the noise to your political end. If the conversation is taking place in kitchens, cafes, bars and pubs – whereas it was maybe a news item before, now it's the common currency of conversation in the UK. And it's because of this record. (Geldof in Singh "Bob Geldof: Don't Like the Band Aid Lyrics" para. 10-11)

Geldof's response to the criticism has also been high handed and dismissive: "It's a pop song, it's not a doctoral thesis. They can f--- off. [...] They're more than welcome to be offended by me. I couldn't give a toss. Seriously, I'm the wrong guy" (6). Nevertheless, the song's simplistic message and the fact that it sold over a million copies in just a few weeks, indicating the song's popularity, remains troubling. As various critics have also argued Geldof's song ignores Christianity's long history on the continent and the fact that it now "thrives in Africa rather more than it now does in much of Europe," (*The Spectator* para. 6). It therefore follows that Africans would of course know it's Christmas. The song silences and conceals complex cultural and historical processes while assuming Africans are ignorant and voiceless.

I have thus chosen to commence this project with a discussion of "Do They Know It's Christmas" because it highlights many of the issues that the three women writers, whose work is the focus of this study, are concerned with. The song also illustrates the need for continued debate and dialogue with regards to Africa's global positioning. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta and Chika Unigwe are some of Nigeria's newest and most prominent female literary

voices. These three authors have won several international awards in the last ten years since the publication of their debut novels. They rank highly, among the handful of African women writing fiction about Africa, within the context of the competitive global publishing industry. All three authors draw on their own experience of living both within Nigeria and in the African diaspora to write stories of Nigerian women which interrogate issues of identity in a rapidly changing transcultural context. In depicting different “stories” of Africa, they therefore attempt to disrupt hegemonic power structures by challenging what the definitive narratives of Africa should be.

The Danger of a Single Story

In her 2009 TED talk at the Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) conference in California in the United States, entitled “The Danger of a Single Story,” Adichie recalls one of her first experiences in America as a young nineteen-year-old university student. Her anecdote warrants quoting at length:

My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my “tribal music,” and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove. What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me even before she saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronising, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals. (“Danger of a Single Story” para. 1)

In relating this incident, Adichie highlights the prejudice and racism that continues to be perpetrated against Africans. Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina also explores similar concerns in his work. Wainaina’s polemical piece “How to Write About Africa” was published by the international literary magazine *Granta* in 2005. It poked fun at a history of ‘Western’ writing about the continent by presenting a satirised list of genre attributes for such writing. Included in the list are generalised stereotypes that have come to typify perceptions of

the continent comparable to those expressed by Adichie's roommate. Addressing an imaginary reader and writer, Wainaina quips:

In your text, treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book. The continent is full of deserts, jungles, highlands, savannahs and many other things, but your reader doesn't care about all that, so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular. ("How to Write" 92)

The article went viral and became the most forwarded piece in *Granta's* history. Wainaina's antipathy towards the perceived popularity of his article and the reception it received, however, illustrates the complex, often difficult, position writers like Wainaina and Adichie occupy as they negotiate the various social, cultural and political positions they choose to adopt or are compelled to take on as African writers. As Wainaina confesses wryly in his follow-up piece: "Now I am 'that guy,' the conscience of Africa: I will admonish you and give you absolution" ("How to Write About Africa II" 6). Wainaina also observes that since 'How to Write About Africa' first appeared, now:

people write to ask me for permission to write about Africa. They want me to tell them what I think, how they did. Be frank, they say, be candid. Tell it like it is. I have considered investing in a rubber stamp. I have imagined myself standing at the virtual borders of Africa, a black minuteman with a rubber stamp, processing applications — where YES means "Pass go, pay one hundred dollars," and NO means "Tie 'em up and deport 'em." ("How to Write About Africa II" para. 1-2)

Both Adichie and Wainaina are contemporary authors working in the new millennium who argue for alternative narratives about Africa that resist normative hegemonic discourses or what Adichie refers to as "the danger of a single story."

Published in 2003, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is a bildungsroman which tells the story of a fifteen-year-old girl, Kambili Achike who has to come to terms with her father, Eugene Achike's, physical and emotional abuse and matures into adulthood against the backdrop of a Nigerian military coup. Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* (2006) is also a coming-of-age narrative. Set in the sprawling metropolis of Lagos, it examines the different choices

made by two childhood friends, Enitan Taiwo and Sheri Bakare, who inhabit different class and religious positions, in order to survive in a city faced with post-independence socio-political challenges. Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street* (2009) is set primarily in Europe. The novel focuses on the lives of four Nigerian women, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, who immigrate to Antwerp, Belgium in order to escape lives in Nigeria marred by economic deprivation and sexual abuse. They do so through a criminal syndicate that deals in the sexual trafficking of African women to Europe.

Unigwe's novel differs from those of the other two authors in two ways. Firstly, while each of the three women authors has chosen female characters as protagonists; Unigwe is the only author whose narrative does not utilise children as primary focalisers. Child narrators are central to Adichie's and Atta's narratives. Christopher Ouma contends that "through the child protagonist and her memories" the authors examine "ways in which childhood can be considered as a set of ideas in examining the underlying problem of identity" ("Childhood (s) in *Purple Hibiscus*" 49). I will provide a more detailed discussion of the child protagonist and other narrative strategies later in this introduction. Secondly, *On Black Sister's Street* is Unigwe's first novel in English, but she has published a previous novel in Dutch, *De Feniks* (2005), so her recent novel asks pertinent questions about the novelist's choice of language in the African diaspora. *De Feniks* was hailed as ground-breaking as the first novel by a Belgian of African origin. The narrative details the lives of a multiracial Belgian and Nigerian couple whose child dies and how they both deal with the loss of their son. But as Daria Tunca argues, the novel also received mixed reviews by some critics who attributed this to the novel's aesthetic flaws. Tunca posits that the "lukewarm" reception is rather a "reflection of Belgium's unwillingness to be represented as 'other' and 'unfamiliar' by a 'black' African author" than due to any failings of the novel (Tunca 2).

Despite these minor disparities, all three novelists address similar concerns about the current status of African women both in Nigeria and within the African diaspora. As will be discussed, they provide access to a range of distinctly African female characters and yet at the same time contest the very notion of what it means to be a 'Nigerian' and, by extension, an 'African'. The young female characters of these three novels are challenged with facing a difficult African past and the complex realities of the postcolonial and diasporic present in the effort to establish identities on their own individual terms. This project will examine the representation of female African identity in a context in which contemporary African culture is revealed to be a dynamic and ever-shifting force. Adichie, Atta and Unigwe do not perceive Africa as a stable, homogeneous signifier as it has been historically interpreted but are mindful of the multiple meanings associated with the name. Moreover, as Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe suggest, "*Africa* as a name, as an idea, and as an object of academic and public discourse has been, and remains, fraught" (348). Further explicating their argument, they assert:

Africa is not only perpetually caught and imagined within a web of difference and absolute otherness. More radically, the sign is fraught because Africa so often ends up epitomizing the intractable, the mute, the abject, or the other-worldly. (348)

Thus, they assert the need to reimagine different narratives of the continent "that defamiliarize commonsense readings of Africa" (352). The three novelists in this thesis provide a similar rationale for their authorial projects. Adichie further emphasises the relation between the "single story" and power:

There is a word, an Igbo word that I think about whenever I think about the power structures of the world, and it is "nkali." It is a noun that loosely translates to "to be greater than another." Like our economic and political worlds, stories too are defined by the principle of nkali. How they are told, who tells them, when they are told, how many stories are told, are really dependent on power. Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. (in "Danger of a Single Story" para. 2)

The three women authors therefore join a much larger and older literary project, which attempted to correct the imbalance of power by articulating through fiction the diverse

identities and histories of the continent. Adichie, Atta and Unigwe are thus positioned within what critics like Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton have termed the third generation. First and second generation African writers are categorised as those born in the “first five decades of the twentieth century when the colonial event was in full force. Their textualities were therefore, massively overdetermined by that experience” (14). In terms of Adesanmi and Dunton’s description, the colonial period becomes the defining epoch upon which the modern African novel is birthed with its impetus to write authentic African stories. They would then place the writers and theorists of Negritude in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Senegalese leader and poet, Leopold Sedar Senghor into the first generation. Negritude’s appeal to a distinct ‘black’ identity and culture that is different and opposed to whiteness was influential in the birth of a literary movement that sought to counter colonial discourses. Negritude’s utilisation of stereotypes to assert the humanity of the ‘black’ man however, “reflected European prejudices” and “functioned only as an antithesis of white supremacy [...] It has therefore been met with criticism from various African writers and thinkers who argue against the idea of an authentic ‘black’ self. Contemporary theorists like Ato Quayson highlight the constructed nature of the term ‘black’ and therefore of the peculiar characteristics identified with the notion of ‘blackness.’ In a self-confessed polemical mode, he posits “*There are no blacks in Africa,*” [Italics in original] and argues:

blackness (read here: *Africanness* also) is first and foremost a location within a structure of determinations. This structure writes itself in history as a series of cross-cultural encounters in which blackness has always had a particular quality of impoverishment and evolutionary backwardness as its signature. No idle semiotic structure, it spawns material effects. In a quite real sense, all changes to the knowledge-economy nexus within which “Africans” are denominated have to go through a series of genre chains in which knowledge is aligned with management (in the economic as well as political sense) and with power. These genre chains are partly situated within Africa’s self-conception. But they are also heavily dependent on debates about Africa from outside the continent. (“Obverse Denominations: Africa?” 586)

Quayson’s critique thus implicates nativist theories such as Negritude in the very systems of power they seek to disrupt and challenge. Cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, makes an analogous assertion and further reiterates that Negritude’s understanding of identity

complicates the postcolonial discourses that were instrumental in countering colonialism (“Cultural Identity” 223). Cultural identity in this regard was thought to emanate from a “collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’ which people with a shared history have in common” (223). Hall, however, does not denigrate the utility of this conception of identity. Instead, he underscores the importance of reconceptualising notions of identity in a rapidly changing contemporary world. He notes, for example, that the essentialist notion of ‘blackness’ was instrumental in the anti-racist struggle in Britain and across the world in the 70s. But in Britain, at least, this “had a certain way of silencing the specific experiences of Asian people who differed in historic and cultural backgrounds from those of other peoples categorised under the term ‘black’ (“Old and New Identities” 56). He also asserts that this celebration of ‘black’ identity obscured from view the “authority of Black masculinity over Black women” (56), an argument Atta, Adichie and Unigwe evoke in their novels.

The Negritude debate also included many other canonical first-generation African writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Eshia Mphahlele and Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong’o. As the “cultural/political novelists of the 1950s and 1960s” (Adesanmi and Dunton 14), their ideas informed the issues around nationalism, language and decolonisation as well early attempts at defining African literature and its theoretical impulses. Second-generation writers, Adesanmi and Dunton argue, “were also born in the colonial event but their formative years were shaped by independence and its aftermath of disillusionment and stasis” (14). Thus their work reflects this sense of disillusionment as the optimism that characterised the nationalist fervour of the early independence years waned. According to the two critics, third-generation writers are “children of the postcolony” (14), to use Djiboutian writer Alfred Waberi’s term, and were born after 1960, “the emblematic year of African political independence” (14). Their texts display interest in emerging transnational identities as well as the socio-political issues arising

out of a globalised world driven by technological advances. Often working and writing within urban spaces either in the Euro-America diaspora or in Nigeria, the experience of migration, displacement and exile all feature prominently among third-generation writers. The emergence of a significant number of women writers among third-generation writers has also foregrounded sexuality and gender relations as central thematic concerns.

The three writers in this project, however, utilise several literary traditions and genres in their work which complicate the notion of “generations” as conceived by critics like Adesanmi and Dunton. The two critics argue that the “generational approach remains one of the cornerstones of literary criticism largely due to the possibilities it offers for a systematic understanding of literary trends and currents synchronically and diachronically” (13). Despite their clearly articulated reasons for classifying the modern Nigerian canon in this manner, however, the term “generations” retains such ambiguity that I am hesitant to utilise it in my discussion of the novels by Adichie, Atta and Unigwe. I would suggest that the presupposition that the Nigerian literary canon should begin with the colonial era is problematic, particularly when one considers the rich history of orality in Africa, a history both critics acknowledge yet unwittingly silence in their classification. Liz Gunner asserts that “orality needs to be seen not simply as the ‘absence of literacy’ but as something self-constitutive *sui generis*” (Gunner 67). Hence, as a purveyor of knowledge, orality in Africa continues to hold a critical role in the understanding of the continent’s history and literature. The various oral genres such as “storytelling, proverbs, epics, incantations [...] and dramatic performances form a substantial part of literary expression on the continent” (Quayson, *African Literature* 65).

I would contend that contemporary writers like Adichie, Atta and Unigwe cannot be fully appreciated without this understanding. For instance, Adichie’s engagement with Achebe’s seminal novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is in part influenced by Achebe’s deployment of Igbo oral traditions in his novel. Achebe sought to counter colonial discourses about Africa by

creating a coherent Igbo worldview. He utilised oral genres such as proverbs, folk tales and songs and illustrated the devastating impact of the colonial encounter. Adichie's novel, as Brenda Cooper asserts, is "a sequel that incorporates Igbo orality in a narrative that celebrates cultural hybridity and charts Nigeria's postcolonial woes" (123). Thus, rather than positioning herself in opposition to her predecessors, Adichie appropriates their work and engages in an intertextual dialogue that revises and re-maps earlier fiction and themes. Like *Things Fall Apart*, *Purple Hibiscus* centres on an oppressive father-figure and the impact his domineering presence has on his family. But unlike Achebe's third-person narrator through whom Okonkwo's flaws are revealed, Adichie utilises the female voice in Kambili's first-person narration. In addition, Heather Hewett argues that "while Achebe explored the links between religion and colonialism and their effects on traditional Nigerian society, Adichie refocuses the inquiry by adding gender" (80). Adichie's novel is also in conversation with much older works by other Nigerian women writers including Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Both of these works reconfigure *Things Fall Apart* by incorporating a female protagonist and challenge the "idealization of motherhood" (80) in Achebe's novel. Nwapa and Emecheta form part of a heritage of African women authors who challenge the exclusion of female writers from the dominant literary canon. Furthermore, Adichie's choice of title also resonates with the work of African-American writer, Alice Walker and her seminal novel, *The Colour Purple*. Adichie's depiction of Kambili's father Eugene Achike as both oppressor and victim is in part influenced by Walker's conception of womanism which "recognises the mutual suffering that 'black' men and women have endured, be it at the hands of the slavers or the colonisers" (Cooper 127). Adichie is therefore also appropriating an African-American tradition of writing that includes women writers like Walker and Toni Morrison. This is especially significant given her diasporic positioning as a Nigerian writer living in the United States.

The utilisation of English as the preferred medium of writing and expression for Adichie, Atta and Unigwe is also indicative of their adoption of multiple literary traditions. Atta, Adichie and Unigwe's work engages with the writers who were influential in the development of the African canon in English but this new crop of women authors, however, also differs significantly from some of their predecessors, particularly as regards their attitudes to identity and to language. In the pivotal 1986 text, *Decolonising the Mind*, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o emphasised the renewal of history and identity which might be made possible by the reclamation of African languages displaced by 'Western' colonial languages and he continues in varying ways to espouse this perspective in his most recent works. His latest novel *Murogi wa Kagogo* was first published in Kikuyu in 2004 with the English translation *Wizard of the Crow* released two years later. While Wa Thiong'o does not call for the total abandonment of the English language, he has consistently advocated for the utilisation of African languages as a primary mode of expression for the African writer. In his speech at the 2012 Sunday Times Literary Awards in Johannesburg, South Africa, he reiterated his argument cautioning against what he argues is the demise of indigenous languages:

The African middle class is running from their languages. In the process they perpetrate child abuse on a national scale. For to deny a child, any child, their right to mother tongue, to bring up such a child as a monolingual English speaker in a society where the majority speak African languages, to alienate that child from a public they may be called to serve, is nothing short of child abuse. To have mother tongue, whatever it is, and add other languages to it is empowerment. But to know all the other languages and not one's own is enslavement. I hope Africa chooses empowerment over enslavement. ("Speaking My Language" para. 8)

The three women writers focused on in this thesis, however, view English as a tool to transgress and traverse global boundaries and break out of essentialisms that they perceive as limiting. In this regard, their perspectives are much closer to those of Achebe who contends that: "The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use" (*Morning* 61). Adichie, Atta and Unigwe therefore, do not display a sense of estrangement with regard to the English language. They have instead taken ownership of the

language and, following Achebe, utilise what he describes as a “new English, altered to suit its new African surroundings” (62). In doing so, they ascribe to a more syncretic notion of language and identity that attempts to understand the intricacies of a contemporary postcolonial Africa where English and, by extension, ‘Western’ cultural practices can no longer be simply perceived as by-products of the ‘West’ imposed on colonised societies.

My engagement with *Purple Hibiscus*, *Everything Good Will Come* and *On Black Sisters’ Street* thus takes cognisance of all of these complexities. I utilise terms such as “emerging” or “contemporary” when referring to the three women writers in this study. I would argue that although these terms are not without ambiguities, they are perhaps less conclusive and exclusionary than the term “generations.” They place the authors firmly in the present and accord their work a freshness or newness that engages with the past but at the same time reconfigures and reassesses current issues of identity in the face of social and political challenges in the new millennium. That said, however, my analysis of the three novels is not altogether new but builds on older literary analyses within the broader rubric of postcolonialism. My observation regarding Adichie’s American roommate’s reaction at the outset of this introductory chapter as well as the discussion thus far can of course be deemed passé and part of a postcolonial dialogue that has long since passed or is no longer relevant given the emergence of globalisation theories and cultural studies as the predominant intellectual discourses with which to “consider the contemporary moment” (Wilson et al. 1). Postcolonial theory with its emphasis on imperialism and colonial processes is thought by some to be “an exhausted paradigm” (Wilson et al. 1). Yet it is my contention that Adichie’s concerns expressed in her TED talk and in her writing, as well as those of Unigwe and Atta, reiterate the continued relevance of postcolonialism as a theoretical practice and as means of interpreting the world. As Revathi Krishnaswamy observes “to be global first and foremost is to be postcolonial and to be postcolonial is always already to be global” (qtd. in Wilson et al.

1). Defining the term ‘postcolonialism’ can be a fraught and complicated endeavour given the heterogeneity of the field. Following Quayson, however, I assert that postcolonialism is more fruitfully understood as “a process of postcolonializing” rather than as a specific reference to the historical processes of decolonisation and their aftermath (*Postcolonialism* 9).

Furthermore Quayson argues:

it is important to highlight instead a notion of the term as a process of coming-into-being and of struggle against colonialism and its aftereffects. In this respect the prefix would be fused with the sense invoked by ‘anti’. (9)

Quayson’s evocation of a postcolonialism that is non-linear in its historiography finds resonance in the work of several other critics who argue for alternative configurations of postcolonial discourses that take cognisance of evolving global social and political relations. Patrick Williams, for instance, identifies a utopian thrust in this definition of postcolonialism that is “looking forward to a better, as yet unrealized world” and defines postcolonialism as an “anticipatory discourse” (93). This utopic sensibility, however, is undergirded by what Quayson describes as a “need to attend to the material, social and economic factors within which any discourse is framed, and which given the fraught nature of the postcolonial referent in the real world, always require urgent attention” (*Postcolonialism* 6). Unigwe’s novel in particular illustrates this concern for a literary praxis engaged with the “real world.” *On Black Sisters’ Street* may be a fictional account of four women’s lives, however, as will be discussed, Unigwe makes a concerted effort to ensure that the narrative reflects the lived experience of the women whom she portrays. In doing so, the novel reveals the issues of racism, patriarchy and economic and political deprivation that compel the women to leave their home country. Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* also highlights the ethical imperative to which Quayson refers. Consequently, despite the fact that the novel labours under the author’s overtly feminist polemics, it nevertheless draws attention to the impact of gender violence on women and the dominance of patriarchy in the postcolony.

Achille Mbembe argues for a postcolonialism that eschews oppositional binaries of the West and Africa more prevalent in the writing of earlier postcolonial theorists. He observes:

What finally characterizes postcolonial thought is entanglement and concatenation and its critique of essentialism. From this point of view it is opposed to a particular version of Western illusion, that there can be no subject other than in the circular, permanent referral to oneself and one's own mastery, to an essential and inexhaustible singularity. In countering this illusion, postcolonial thought stresses the fact that identity arises from multiplicity and dispersion, that self-referral is only possible in the in-between, in the gap between mark and demarcation, in co-constitution. Seen from this perspective, colonization no longer appears as mechanical and unilateral domination forcing the subjugated into silence and inaction. Quite the reverse: the colonized person is a living, talking, conscious, active individual whose identity arises from violation, erasure and self-rewriting. (*Postcolonial Thought* 34)

Mbembe interrogates and complicates notions of a colonised/coloniser dichotomy, by illustrating the complicities and negotiations involved in the colonial process. In doing so, he alerts us to a critical dimension of identity in the postcolony, one that disturbs normative hierarchical understandings of social, economic and political relations. Postcolonial relations as theorised by Mbembe and Quayson are thus most vividly illustrated in Atta, Adichie and Unigwe's novels. The narratives not only epitomise the "entanglement and concatenation" of which Mbembe speaks but they also bear the hallmarks of the utopic thrust engendered in Quayson's rendering of postcolonialism; although, as I argue in the three main chapters, this optimism is not altogether unproblematic. The conclusion of Adichie's novel, for instance, disallows any easy celebration of an idealised future for its troubled protagonist who, I argue, cannot adopt the easy optimism with which the story ends, given the narrative's plot and character development. Unigwe's novel also presents an equally ambiguous ending—with Sisi in spirit form whispering curses into the ears of Dele's daughters, the man who was responsible for trafficking her to Antwerp. As I argue, these events do not so much demonstrate Sisi's eventual freedom as they do her incapacity to assert her agency in the face of the very real material and social discourses that obliged her to leave her home in the first place. This is further illustrated by the rather disturbing image of Sisi cursing Dele's young daughters instead of the man himself.

How to Write About Africa

As part of her research when she was writing *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe spent several months on the streets of Antwerp speaking to Nigerian women migrants employed as sex workers. Unigwe recalls that she had to act and dress the part of a sex worker in order to gain the women's trust:

I dragged my husband and we went there. I put on a mini-skirt and high boots and then we went and honestly, the first time I tried to be honest and told one of the girls that I was a writer and I had come to do research, she started laughing like yeah right. She thought I was a new girl, who wanted information. They were quite willing to talk to me. And once, they thought I was a new girl, I didn't bother to convince them otherwise but of course, it was easier to get information from them. [...] I mean I always used to think I was a very broad minded and non-judgemental good person and the more I spoke to them, the more I realised how judgemental I was and I always say that one of the biggest lessons I learnt was how shame can be such a luxury but we don't realise it. If things are going well for you and no one depends on you for basic necessities, you can afford to have shame but for some of these girls, shame does not even come into it because they have to earn the money. ("In Conversation: Chika Unigwe" para. 9)

Several of Unigwe's interests are evident in the above quotation. The first is the author's concern for the accurate representation of the women whose lives she evokes in her novel. She attempts to write the experiences of often marginalised rural or working class Nigerian women and seeks not simply to speak for those on the Zwartezusterstraat, the street on the outskirts of Antwerp where the red light district is located, but to provide a space where the women depicted in the lives of her characters Efe, Ama, Joyce and Sisi can speak for themselves. In doing so, she argues for the inclusion of marginalised voices as a rewriting of normative global histories that exclude or completely silence marginalised communities such as those of Unigwe's protagonists. Daria Tunca notes that Zwart(e)zusterstraat with an 'e' means "black sister's street" in Dutch, an alteration to the street name "Zwartzusterstraat" which Unigwe makes for the purposes of her novel (18). Historically 'Zwartzusters' refers to Catholic nuns who belonged to the order known as the "Nazareth Convent of the Black Nuns" named after the black habits they wore (Loyola International Nachbahr Huis para.1). The author thus appropriates Belgian cultural history and reworks it to deconstruct the idea of

Belgium as home only to the 'white' European and begins to assert the presence of 'others' who constitute part of Belgian society. The double meaning of the street name also interrogates normative assumptions of gender. The nuns who cloak themselves for reasons of piety are juxtaposed against the prostitutes who are disrobed and put on display as sexual objects further affirming the existence of the latter and questioning the inherent marginalisation and discrimination that the sex workers face in the novel. Also central to Unigwe's project is the recognition and awareness of her own social and economic status as a middle-class, western-educated intellectual and artist working and living in Belgium. Her interaction with the prostitutes in Antwerp can be read as a literal attempt to disrupt her own privileged position so that she might understand her own prejudices and attempt to achieve a measure of authenticity in her text. At the same time, as a migrant herself, Unigwe also occupies a marginal position within the local Belgian context and within the 'Western' world as an African woman author. In this regard, Adichie and Atta also share a similar subject position as part of the African intellectual diaspora. All three authors attended academic institutions in Europe and the United States. Unigwe attended the University of Leiden while Atta graduated from the University of Birmingham in Britain and Adichie from Harvard University.

In some ways, the three novelists I have selected in this thesis exemplify Stuart Hall's assertion of the need to attend to the emergence of 'new ethnicities.' For Hall, the fluidity of cultural identities means that contemporary 'black' identity can only be understood through difference: "we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination" ("Old and New Identities" 57). Their positions in the African diaspora provide these three young authors better access to the 'Western' publishing industry and other infrastructure which places them at a distinct advantage in comparison to other

writers in Africa or even in the ‘West.’ Simon Gikandi, however, challenges celebratory conceptions such as those espoused by Hall. Writers like Adichie, Atta and Unigwe exemplify what he describes as a postcolonial cosmopolitanism whose central premise is the “claim to displacement as the essential condition of modern subjectivity” (in Wilson et al. 24). This displacement is epitomised by a “rejection of local or national loyalties” on the “journey towards a common humanity, not nation or *ethne*” (24). Thus, the quintessential postcolonial cosmopolitan is accorded the privileged status of a well-travelled, educated and versatile subject. But as Gikandi points out, this state of rootlessness and the access to global “cultural goods and vocabularies” (24) in the metropolises of the ‘West’ have to be understood as being mitigated by the nature of the journey itself. He argues instead that these conceptions exclude marginalised groups such as refugees who flee from failed states and are driven from their homes and countries as a means of survival. Refugees, he asserts are “signs of a dislocated locality, a mote in the eye of cosmopolitanism, of that postcolonial identity which derives its legitimacy from the mastery of the culture of modern Europe” (23). According to Gikandi, the refugee is:

The Other of the cosmopolitan; rootless by compulsion, this figure is forced to develop an alternative narrative of global cultural flows, functioning in a third zone between metropolis and ex-colony, producing and reproducing localities in the centres of metropolitan culture itself. Missing the very states they fled in the first place, refugees do not want to be cosmopolitan because they have no idiom for this experience; instead they set out to demarcate a zone of ethnicity and locality. Yet they are global because they cannot return to their old spaces of identity and must somehow learn to live outside both the nations that have rejected them and those that have adopted them. (26)

Perhaps more than the other two novels in this study, Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* illustrates the complexities put forward by Gikandi given its multiple locations in both Belgium and Nigeria. None of the four female characters in the narrative can be easily assimilated into the ‘new ethnicities’ espoused by Hall. They are not refugees in the normative sense of the word for they choose not to be perceived as such and, except for Alek, who is originally from the Republic of South Sudan, are not fleeing war or political violence.

They also do not bear the hallmarks of the elite postcolonial cosmopolitan as explicated by Gikandi. In that sense, I would argue, as Adichie, Atta and Unigwe seem very much aware, that the act of writing and representing the female African ‘Other’ is not quite as clear cut as one might readily assume given the authors’ literal connection to Africa as their continent of birth and their privileged positioning both in Africa, in America and Europe. Thus, Unigwe’s research on the streets of Antwerp can be said to be informed by a concern for authenticity that is further influenced by the doubled and complex positioning she occupies especially because global inequalities and racist discourses about Africa continue to exist. She often utilises essentialised notions of identity but does so with the intention of subverting them. For instance, Unigwe’s women characters in some ways conform to various stereotypes of the ‘black’ female subject but her novel reveals the erroneous preconceptions that frame those stereotypes. The women who arrive in Belgium can be read as merely sexual objects from a ‘poor’ African country but *On Black Sister’s Street* interrogates that stereotype and undermines it. Adichie’s writing also performs a comparable task. Her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which is set in the background of a civil war in Nigeria, can be viewed through the simplistic lens that would define Nigeria as an ethnicised, warring nation. But the narrative continually challenges such a notion through her use of multiple narrators and stylistic devices.

Furthermore, Adichie contends that while it is in America that she finds her literary voice as it were, she continues to identify herself as Nigerian and African: “Nigeria is the one place where I question myself the least. I lived in the US for about seven years – it is a place that is very convenient and I am happy there, but I don’t belong” (“I Left Home to Find Home” para. 2). Unigwe too seems to have had a somewhat similar experience to Adichie. She states that she stopped writing poetry when she migrated to Belgium because of the stress she experienced having to acclimatise to a new culture:

I moved from a space where I was very comfortable, to a space where I not only had to learn a new language, I had to learn social codes and etiquettes as well. It erodes your self-confidence realizing that nothing you knew mattered anymore. I suffered from panic attacks the first few months and for the first year I could not write anything. (“Chika Unigwe, The Per Contra interview with Miriam N. Kotzin” para. 6)

This sense of alienation and longing for home in some respects recalls Rushdie’s notion of “imaginary homelands.” Rushdie asserts that writers in the diaspora create “imaginary homelands” driven by an implied sense of nostalgia for their countries of origin (*Imaginary Homelands* 10). Rushdie notes that while the stories these writers tell may be fictitious, they often counter the homogenising narratives that have cast their homelands as exotic and ‘Other.’ To interpret Adichie and Unigwe’s experiences through a Rushdian lens, however, misses a crucial point that the authors are making. Their writing projects are not merely a nostalgic re-imagining of an Africa that in fact does not exist in any ‘real’ sense except as a cathartic realisation for the author. Rather, they “find home” by being able to view Nigeria from the socio-cultural distance that their diasporic positioning provides. In the same interview highlighted above, Adichie reiterates:

Leaving Nigeria made me much more aware of being Nigerian and what that meant. It also made me aware of race as a concept, because I didn’t think of myself as black until I left Nigeria. I think you travel to search and come back home to find yourself there. In many ways travel becomes the process of finding. Travel is not the end point, it is the process. I’m not sure I would have this strong sense of being Nigerian if I had not left Nigeria. (“I Left Home to Find Home” para. 4)

All three authors position themselves within a global, cultural milieu as both Nigerian and African and do not necessarily reject the ‘local’ for the ‘global’ as Gikandi argues of the postcolonial cosmopolitan; sentiments Adichie expresses again in her previously quoted TED talk:

I must say that before I went to the U.S. I didn’t consciously identify as African. But in the U.S. whenever Africa came up people turned to me. Never mind that I knew nothing about places like Namibia. But I did come to embrace this new identity, and in many ways I think of myself now as African. (“Danger of a Single Story” para 1)

Unigwe, Atta and Adichie have also variously acknowledged that their positions in the ‘West’ allow them to speak to a broader audience and, as previously indicated, counter the continued exoticification of Africa. Adichie asserts in an interview with Eve Daniels:

Of course there are wars and there is hunger in many African countries. But there are also millions of normal people who are going about their lives, with gains and losses, love and pain, just like everyone else. I hope my fiction will enable Americans to see the human and in many ways ordinary lives of Nigerians. (“A Q&A with Chimamanda Adichie” para. 6)

Echoing Wainaina’s perspectives explicated at the beginning of this introduction, Atta, however, points out that the global reach that she and other contemporary African authors like Adichie and Unigwe enjoy has not diminished the circulation of preconceived ideas about the continent and its people within the international publishing industry. Atta notes that as a Nigerian author she is often expected to “fulfil their fantasies of Africa” (“Author Interview” para. 5) and to write images of Africa that are familiar and stereotypical. In another interview, Atta recalls discovering that the cover photograph on the US publication of *Everything Good Will Come* was taken from an “advertisement for an anti-dandruff shampoo” (“Interview with Sefi Atta” 128). The young African-American girl in the photograph has long extensions which Atta asserts her protagonist Enitan would not have worn – since they did not exist in Nigeria in the era Enitan grew up. The author surmises that her American publishers thought the young girl “looked African because her lips are kind of full” (128). This incident illustrates the contrast between how the three women authors choose to position themselves in relation to Africa and how they are packaged and marketed within the global publishing industry as African writers. Adichie, Atta and Unigwe still retain their marginal status as African women writers and it appears that the ‘new’ interest in young African writers is merely a continuation of a historic fetishisation of the continent. Kamila Shamsie further elaborates on this point although specifically citing examples from Britain:

The group ‘for which the work is produced’ is not a reference to writers’ intended audiences, but rather to the audience to whom the book is marketed, that is, the audience which publishers consider when deciding whether or not to add a book to their list. [...] This

audience is largely white. While the most visible of anglophone writers in the UK might look far more multi-cultural than they did twenty-five years ago, the book-buying audience has remained largely unchanged in demographic terms, if not in terms of its taste. This also applies to the world of booksellers and publishers. All of which means that ‘international’ or ‘global’ writing remains another term for ‘minority’ writing, with a need to appeal to the majority audience in order to receive widespread attention or really even to make its way into bookstores. (111)

Shamsie also posits that writers like Adichie, Atta and Unigwe are compelled to act as “cultural ambassadors” (111 – 112) and are more widely published and marketed when they focus “on the big themes of migration, race, ethnicity, Britishness etcetera” (112). The three authors in this study nevertheless assert that, despite these difficulties, of greater import is the fact that they are writing and being read and published globally. Adichie has repeatedly indicated in interviews that she understands her readership as one that extends beyond her continent of birth. She emphasizes that being viewed merely as an African author writing for an African audience can be stifling and retard creativity: “I want to be read in Nigeria. And I want to be read in the rest of the world” (qtd. in Jackson 6).

Narrative Stylistics: Child Narrators and the Female Voice

Adichie, Atta and Unigwe continually place emphasis on the female voice as an alternative to normative histories of the continent in what I would posit is a ‘writing back to Africa.’ As I mentioned earlier, in their first novels, both Adichie and Atta utilise the female child or adolescent as a focaliser although they do so in differing ways. In *Purple Hibiscus* and *Everything Good Will Come* the female protagonists trace their maturation into adulthood via the spaces of emotional and physical upheaval that they experience as children. Atta’s protagonist Enitan narrates her childhood as a woman in her thirties in a linear narrative set out in four sections. The first two sections are told through the eyes of a young eleven-year-old Enitan and focus on the developing friendship between Enitan and her Muslim neighbour Sheri. The rest of the novel is written in a more mature voice as Enitan grapples with life as an adult living and working in Lagos. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the seventeen-year-old Kambili

recalls events two years after the death of her father. Unlike Atta's novel, Adichie utilises a non-linear timeline with the first three sections narrated in past tense while the final section is narrated in present tense. A more detailed exposition of the narrative structure of the two novels will be provided in detail in the chapters addressing each work. Adichie and Atta utilise the child figure as a literary device upon which they anchor their representations of the contemporary Nigerian family. Madeline Hron observes "childhood represents a particularly resistant space, of complex, on-going negotiation and articulation of difference that is perhaps not as readily accessible in the stable, socially structured world of adults (Hron 30). This apparent stability of the adult world is, however, rendered illusory at the outset for neither of the societies in which both novels are set is particularly stable. As Ellen Pifer asserts:

To study the image of the child is to study ourselves, not only because we all were once children but also because the child's changing image is inscribed by the force of our feelings and our fears – our beliefs, prejudices, anxieties, and conflicts. The fate of the fictional or literary child, in particular, says as much about the way we view our own nature and destiny and even, as many works of contemporary fiction attest, our chances for succeeding as a species on this planet. (Pifer16)

Atta's protagonist is illustrative of this. Enitan is a precocious child who in the opening sentence declares: "in the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations" (Atta, *Everything* 7). Those inclinations lead her to defy her parents by befriending Sheri, whom she meets through a crack in the fence the two families share. The relationship that develops between the two eleven-year-old young girls flouts various societal conventions and continues into their adulthood. The differing ways in which Sheri and Enitan interact with their world as children and later as adults displays not just their differing outlooks on life but the various modes of behaviour that women adopt as they negotiate the often difficult social spaces they occupy. For Kambili and her brother Jaja in *Purple Hibiscus*, learning to negotiate the troubled spaces of abuse in their home becomes the focal point of their identities. It is only when they develop friendships with their cousins and their Aunt Ifeoma, their father's sister, that they begin to perceive an

alternative mode of being. Ifeoma's home is contrasted with that of her brother Eugene where her children are able to express themselves without fear and thus do not bear the scars of abuse that characterise Kambili and Jaja's childhood. The image of the child is therefore pivotal to both Adichie and Atta's authorial projects. Through the representation of the lived experiences of young children who mature into adults the two writers expose the "beliefs, prejudices, anxieties and conflicts" of Nigerian society (Pifer 16).

Death and Violence

All three authors also centre their narratives on the tropes of death and violence. For Unigwe, death is the catalyst upon which her novel's plot turns. Sisi's murder at the hands of her madam's henchman Segun provides the impetus for the three surviving women to retell their own personal histories. The violence with which Segun bludgeons Sisi to death and the indifference with which he disposes of her body illustrates the banality of violence depicted in the novel. Both Atta and Adichie likewise utilise representations of death and violence in their narratives. Kambili's mother, Beatrice Achike, resorts to poisoning her father after years of physical and emotional abuse while Enitan's life is irrevocably altered after she witnesses her friend Sheri being sexually assaulted by a group of teenage boys. Violence and death are thus critical in the authors' attempts at interrogating larger narratives of colonisation, race, patriarchy, globalisation and religion. As author Ben Okri asserts:

I've come to realize that you can't write about Nigeria truthfully without a sense of violence. To be serene is to lie. Relations in Nigeria are violent relations. It's the way it is, for historical and all sorts of other reasons ... [I]n an atmosphere of chaos art *has* to disturb something. For art to be very cool, very clear – which, in relation to chaos, is a negative kind of disturbance – or it has to be more chaotic, more violent than the chaos around. Put that on the one side. Now think of the fact that for anything new, for something good to come about, for it to reach a level of art, you have to liberate it from old kinds of perception, which is a kind of destruction. An old way of seeing things has to be destroyed for the new one to be born. (Okri qtd. in Quayson, *Postcolonialism* 101).

Okri's statements point towards the alienating potentialities of the literary project which, "defamiliarizes existing categories even as it holds them up to view" and in doing so providing alternatives to "dominant social formations" (Quayson, *Postcolonialism* 94-95). All

three novels therefore do not portray violence for its own sake or for purely aesthetic reasons. Neither are they simply allegories of the postcolonial nation-state. Rather, they offer possibilities of a 'new' mode of being, one that recognises the complexities of the postcolonial present but nevertheless attempts to move beyond what Quayson describes as the "'nervous conditions' engendered by the incoherences of the African postcolony" (93). Quayson's reference to 'nervous conditions' recalls the work of Frantz Fanon. Derived from Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, the term 'nervous conditions' refers to the psychological condition of the colonial subject whose "precariously repressed rage" due to his status as marginalised 'Other' is expressed in violent reprisal against his "fellow oppressed" (Thomas 26-27). Fanon concludes:

Whereas the colonist or police officer can beat the colonized subject day in and day out, insult him and shove him to his knees, it is not uncommon to see the colonized subject draw his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive look from another colonized subject. For the colonized subject's last resort is to defend his personality against his fellow countryman. (*Wretched* 17)

Quayson's utilisation of the term 'nervous conditions' extends Fanon's understanding of the impact of the colonial process in a manner reflective of the work of the three women authors in this study. The personal thus intersects with the public in these novels in both subtle and overt ways as political violence intersects with violence in the home and vice versa. *Purple Hibiscus*, for instance, emphasises the intergenerational, gendered nature of the 'nervous conditions' Beatrice, Kambili and Jaja develop as a result of Eugene's own ordeal at the hands of British missionaries. According to Mbembe, whose ideas around the banality of violence in the everyday in the African postcolony I find most useful in my own work, the postcolony is "chaotically pluralistic yet it has an internal coherence." It is, however, characterised by a "tendency to excess and a lack of proportion" with "a series of corporate institutions" and "a political machinery" which "constitute a distinctive regime of violence"

(*Postcolony* 3). This violence is often depicted through the unequal gender relations that are explored in *Purple Hibiscus*, *Everything Good Will Come* and *On Black Sisters' Street*.

Methodology

My engagement with the three novels in this project will be primarily through an interdisciplinary framework that incorporates various strands of postcolonial theory and cultural studies. Hall's notion of "new ethnicities" is most helpful in comprehending the issues around the diasporic positioning of the three authors whose work is the focus of this thesis. He argues for a destabilisation of totalising notions of 'blackness' as a category of identity and posits that there is a need to question the presupposed essentialisms that are contained in the term 'black.' In doing so, there is a necessary acknowledgement of the complexity of transcultural interactions that provides a useful frame of reference for analysing contemporary postcolonial issues. Recent work in trauma theory that looks at "the usefulness of trauma theory as we know it for understanding colonial traumas such as dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide" (Craps and Buelens 3) also provides an integral theoretical framework for understanding the different socio-cultural relations in the three novels.

In addition, I critically assess how Adichie, Atta and Unigwe address issues of female African identity in their novels by means of their representation of characters. In doing so, I explore how the three authors challenge accepted gender identities and roles within Nigerian society and examine how the three novelists' status as African writers in the diaspora has influenced their perceptions of the continent. Though not explored fully in this introduction, African feminist ideas will be central to my discussion and are critical as a conceptual backbone to this study. Diedre L. Badejo writes:

African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity complements African masculinity, and defends both with the ferocity of

a lioness while simultaneously seeking male defense of both as critical, demonstrable, and mutually obligatory. (Badejo 95)

An African feminist paradigm does not view gender relations as necessarily antagonistic. It advocates for a more balanced and complementarian system which does not necessarily call for the total dismantling of patriarchal norms. Cultural theorist Mary E. Modupe Kolawole further notes that in many African communities, women are “vectors and transmitters of cultural, spiritual, social and moral values” through the various roles they play as “female oral artists” (Kolawole, qtd. in Quayson et al. 94-95). These roles are now being taken up by young writers like Adichie, Atta and Unigwe whose work, as I have argued, is also informed by African oral traditions. All three authors are located within an African paradigm and cognisance of the specific issues that affect women on the continent.

There is a growing body of academic criticism on the work of these three authors, however, I have also found reviews and interviews as well online newspaper articles to be valuable resources in understanding the motivations behind their novels.

My method, following Sheena Patchay, has “been to allow the texts to speak for themselves” (Patchay 30). I have found it necessary to allow the texts to lead the way as it were and choose the theories with which they should be read. As a result, I have found the novels’ characters sometimes transcend different theoretical frameworks or in other moments occupy what appear to be contrasting or contradictory positions. Like Patchay, I too seek “to avoid, as much as possible, theoretical ‘pyrotechnics,’” and adopt a “careful listening and responsible interpretation” whose result I hope is “an openness to and respect for specificity and the ‘difference’ of each text” (30). This, I would argue, provides a much more fruitful engagement with the novels and necessarily circumvents debates such as those about the aesthetics and functionality of art. Instead of asking can the postcolonial novel be both “aesthetic and political?” (Welsch in Wilson et al. 165), the three novels compel a reading that considers them as both effective aesthetic and socially engaged works. The novels

themselves “offer politically and ethically valuable, even necessary, rewritings of the histories they recount or restore” (Patchay 30). I will show they provide a necessary intervention in the analysis and comprehension of the lived realities of the postcolonial present. In embarking on this work, I am led by the words of Ato Quayson: “It is still the case that ultimately we need clear tools by which to understand and struggle against injustice, oppression and even obfuscation” (Quayson, *Postcolonialism* 47).

CHAPTER ONE

Trauma, Violence and the Problematics of Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Fear. I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it, it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavours and colours. (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 197)

This business of womanhood is a heavy burden, she said. 'How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want this, there are sacrifices to be made and you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. (Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* 16)

The first sentence of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's debut novel *Purple Hibiscus* echoes the title of perhaps Nigeria's most famous novel but directs attention at the breakdown of familial relations in an environment of abuse: "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung the heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (3). The young seventeen-year-old narrator, Kambili, commences the narrative with this act of violence shattering any sense of familial normalcy for this eminent middle-class Igbo family. What begins as a necessary assertion of independence from a despotic father, however, culminates in the disintegration of the Achike home. Papa is murdered by his wife but Jaja confesses to the crime and is incarcerated in her place.

Purple Hibiscus is a disquieting novel that explores what it means to grow up in an episteme of violence and terror. It is set in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the country is under military rule having undergone several coups since independence in 1963. The fragility of the nuclear family in the novel has been read by various critics as emblematic of the postcolonial nation-state. The violence in the home, they argue, mirrors that of the larger socio-political environment and that Eugene Achike's violent repression of the members of his family reflects that of the state against its citizens. Heather Hewett observes for example: "as a domestic tyrant, Eugene becomes a figure for the novel's unnamed political tyrant who stages a coup and takes over the country" (89). Kambili's re-telling of her family's history is

seen therefore as transforming the text into a testimonial that bears witness to the “greater story about the nature of tyranny in postcolonial Nigeria” (90). Several other critics provide similar arguments for the novel. Madeline Hron for instance posits that “Kambili’s journey to adulthood also reflects the struggles of young Nigeria, as it negotiates ‘Western’ and traditional norms, while also being overwhelmed by economic disparity, bad governance, pervasive corruption, or human rights violations” (31).³ Kambili’s staggered memories of her childhood are, however, not simply an allegory of the postcolonial nation state as the various critics have suggested. I contend that such a reading, while valid and useful, does not allow for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationships found in the novel.

While I accept that the novel reflects on contemporary Nigeria, I would concur with Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi’s analysis of novels by several contemporary African women writers. She suggests that “it is limiting to treat these texts simply as national allegories or reflections of colonial experience” (18). Rather, she suggests, they “offer alternative scripts that subvert internal systems of power, texts whose gaze is not necessarily towards the colonialist text” (18). In depicting the struggles of the Achike family, *Purple Hibiscus* therefore takes cognisance of the past but explores ways of being that transcend the allegorical and undermine more traditional and hegemonic binaries like coloniser/colonised. Thus, as I will attempt to demonstrate, while still engaging with the politics of postcoloniality, Adichie’s novel disrupts conventional notions of postcolonial subjectivity and disrupts normative assumptions of social relations in contemporary Nigeria. She does so by placing her emphasis on the female voice. Kambili is the novel’s protagonist and focaliser. *Purple Hibiscus* traces her maturation into adulthood via spaces of emotional and physical upheaval that irrevocably

³For Other critics offer similar readings, citing *Purple Hibiscus* as a political allegory, see: Susan Z Andrade. “Adichie’s Genealogies: National and Feminine Novels.” (2011); Jane Bryce. “‘Half and Half Children’: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel.” (2008); Madelaine Hron. “Ora Na-Azu Nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels.” (2008); Heather Hewett. “Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation.” (2005)

alter her sense of self. Her tumultuous relationship with her father at the heart of the novel lends itself to a focused reading of the father-daughter relationship. As Christopher Ouma argues, for Kambili: “grappling with the father figure therefore becomes central to understanding her memories, world(s) and struggles” (*Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction* 54). In this chapter, I will contend that Kambili’s relationship with her mother is equally dynamic and influential. Motherhood becomes a site of contestation where hegemonic discourses are both reinforced and challenged. Adichie’s novel, however, makes distinctions between motherhood as institutionalised practice and motherhood as experience (Nnaemeka 8) highlighting the often contradictory impulses at work within Kambili’s mother. Beatrice Achike retains her status as marginalised ‘Other’ even after the death of her husband, whom she kills by poisoning his tea. As the novel is focalised through Kambili, I will refer to Beatrice and Eugene as Mama and Papa whenever I am discussing these parental figures as viewed by their children Kambili and Jaja.

Reading the Body: Food, Violence and Resistance

Beatrice Achike is depicted as a silent, battered woman who struggles to assert herself in the face of Eugene’s aggression. Her benign presence in the novel is juxtaposed against that of her domineering husband. Yet, this seemingly overt binary between male oppressor and female oppressed is also undermined throughout the novel. Beatrice appears to acquiesce to her husband, displaying psychosomatic symptoms of abuse but she is nevertheless able to create loopholes of resistance that are reinforced by and through her relationship with her children. Her use of food as a weapon to retaliate against Eugene’s abuse illustrates the complexity of her positioning within the domestic space while her deteriorating mental health provides “a context for examining the relationship between madness, murder and knowledge” (Nnaemeka 19). What is radical about Beatrice’s own act of violence, as Obioma Nnaemeka points out in her discussion of women who kill their partners, is not so much the murder in

and of itself but the intentionality with which it is carried out (19). Beatrice plans carefully and methodically executes her husband. The ideology of female subservience that is entrenched in the society depicted in the novel is destabilised by Beatrice's confession after Eugene's death. In contrast to her usual unsteady tone and movements, she speaks calmly and logically with little expression of guilt or horror: "they have found the poison in your father's body [...] I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witchdoctor" (291). Still, Beatrice's sense of autonomy is rendered ambiguous as Jaja confesses to the murder to protect his mother. Her actions are considered so counter-cultural that it is inconceivable that she could have committed the murder. Her declarations of guilt are met with disbelief. She even writes "letters to the newspapers" but "they think grief and denial – that her husband is dead and that her son is in prison – have turned her into this vision of a painfully bony body, of skin speckled with blackheads the size of watermelon seeds" (296). Her emaciated body and dishevelled appearance are explained away as the demeanour of a grieving widow. Beatrice's body, however, is a manifestation of the trauma and pain that she has endured over the years and forms an integral part of Kambili's recollected narrative.

The body in *Purple Hibiscus* is transformed into a text upon which Eugene's acts of violent repression are inscribed. But the body is not only a passive recipient. As Mike Marais points out "bodies are not their own signs, [...] they are in culture and therefore signify rather than stand merely for themselves" (19). Furthermore, in the words of feminist and cultural theorist Susan Bordo, I would argue that in *Purple Hibiscus* "the body is not only a text of culture. It is also "a practical, direct locus of social control. Banally, through table manners and toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines, rules, and practices" (qtd. in Leitch et al. 2362). The domestic scenes, where the bulk of the action in the novel takes place, exemplify this assertion. The tension in the family is magnified when normative family rituals, like

meals at a dinner table become spaces for control. Most, if not all, the moments of physical violence occur in the family home after Beatrice or the children have contravened one of Eugene's rigidly instituted rules and social norms.

Interspaced throughout the novel are the young narrator's vivid descriptions of her father's brutal attacks against herself, her mother and her brother. The breaking of the figurines at the narrative's outset acts as a dark foreshadowing of events to come. Like the delicate ballerina statuettes in "various contorted postures" (Adichie 7) that are rendered shattered and irreparable, all the members of the Achike household bear the hallmarks of fractured identities manifested in their often injured bodies and fragile psyches. The non-linear structure of the novel develops this sense of fragmentation further. "The novel's timeline is divided into four sections" (Cooper 110) with the first three sections narrated in past tense while the final section is narrated in present tense. The first section entitled "Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday," details the events that occur when Jaja refuses to partake of the Catholic ritual of Communion during a Palm Sunday Service (Adichie 1-16). The next two sections: "Speaking With Our Spirits: Before Palm Sunday" (17 – 254) and "The Pieces of Gods: After Palm Sunday" (255 – 292) are told in flashback and delve into the family's life before Jaja's rebellion on that fateful Palm Sunday. The fourth chapter, "A Different Silence: The Present," recounts events after Eugene's death and draws the novel to a close as Kambili and Mama deliver the news to Jaja that he is to be released from prison following the death of the military Head of State. To assert its difference from the old regime, the new civilian government pledges to release all political prisoners following protests by pro-democracy groups who also demand that the government investigate Eugene's murder, "insisting that the old regime killed him" (297).

From the first chapter of the novel, Adichie interweaves the now familiar feminist idiom 'the personal is political' into the narrative as Jaja attempts a kind of coup d'état of his

own against his tyrannical father. The title of the chapter 'Breaking Gods' heralds a new ruling order as Jaja challenges his father's hegemonic status by re-inscribing the secular upon what Papa regards as sacred. In response to Papa's enquiry about his absence at communion, he retorts: "The wafer gives me bad breath" (6). Jaja disavows the symbolic significance of the "wafer" by alluding to its corporeal properties and in doing so exposes the act of communion as an empty ritual that Papa uses to control and manipulate his family. The shock of Jaja's rebellion is registered in Kambili's disbelief. She understands that Jaja's actions could very well result in her father's violent reprisal. Thus, in her mind, only mental instability would cause Jaja to speak as he does to their father:

Had something come loose in his head? Papa insisted we call it the host because "host" came close to capturing the essence, the sacredness, of Christ's body. "Wafer" was too secular, wafer was what one of Papa's factories made – chocolate wafer, banana wafer, what people bought their children to give them a treat better than biscuits. (6)

Jaja's actions do not so much desecrate the body of Christ but point towards his father's hypocrisy. Eugene's public persona of religious devotion contradicts the violent abuse he perpetrates in private. The loss of power he experiences when his son defies him exposes his own vulnerability as his assumed role as a patriarchal godhead in the Achike home is undermined. Even his threats of physical violence are met with defiance. The missal he flings across the room at Jaja does not hit its target. The threat of death is also rendered empty: "You cannot stop receiving the body of our Lord. It is death, you know that" (6). "Then I will die, Papa" Jaja responds, revealing not just his growing sense of autonomy but his father's own fear of mortality. Eugene's stringent upbringing under the tutelage of missionaries who tortured and abused him has left him imprisoned within a belief system so violently instilled in him, he cannot dare question it. He really does believe that if a Catholic devotee does not partake in communion the result is death, whether metaphorical or physical. He so reveres the priests and sisters who brought him up that he violently attempts to inculcate the same beliefs upon his children and enforces with violence if necessary the

requirement of total obedience: “Because God has given you much, he expects much from you. He expects perfection” (47). Eugene’s mimicry of the punitive measures employed against him by the missionaries highlights the centrality of the body as a locus of control; a site upon which the ascetic social rules and regulations are imprinted. For instance, on one occasion, he strikes Kambili’s face for what he regards as her frivolous use of time when she does not arrive at the school gates to meet the family’s driver, Kevin, as promptly as she is expected. Recalling the incident, Kambili notes how her body retains the force of her father’s blow days after the incident: “Once Kevin told Papa I took a few minutes longer, and Papa slapped my left and right cheeks at the same time, so his huge palms left parallel marks on my face and ringing in my ears for days” (51).

Eugene’s masculine identity bears an uncanny resemblance to another troubled male protagonist. His paranoia and obsessive need for dominion recalls that of Baba Muku in Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel *Nervous Conditions* who, like Eugene Achike, is both patriarch and benefactor of his family and community. Both men display symptoms of colonial trauma which, in Fanonian terms, have been described as ‘nervous conditions.’ Derived from the Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, the title of Dangarembga’s novel is explained in her epigraph, “the condition of the native is a nervous condition.” Both *Nervous Conditions* and *Purple Hibiscus* speak to each other in an intertextual dialogue that seeks to write the female voice into what has been a largely male discourse centred on issues of nationalism and postcolonial politics. The emphasis these two novels place on the politics of the body specifically in relation to food, its consumption, preparation and distribution, further highlights the inherent inequalities associated with the patriarchal ruling order. Food is often associated with the domestic sphere and thus with women. Food in *Nervous Conditions* is tied almost exclusively with female pathology, particularly in the case of the narrator’s cousin Nyasha who suffers from the eating

disorder anorexia nervosa. Deepika Bhari argues that Nyasha's illness "suggests the textualized female body on whose abject person are writ large the imperial inscriptions of colonization, the intimate branding of patriarchy, and the battle between native culture, 'Western' narrative, and her complex relationship with both" (1). Nyasha utilises food as a source for resistance in a somewhat similar manner to Beatrice Achike in *Purple Hibiscus*. Although Beatrice does not physically harm herself, she nevertheless resorts to food in her attempts to retaliate against an oppressive social order. Nyasha's inability to voice her pain also links her to Kambili. Both react to their traumatised colonised fathers by resorting to silence and utilising the body as the location of their struggle against the personal and societal pressures they undergo.

In an interview with author and journalist Aminatta Forna, Adichie comments on what she regards as the primary difference between the two novels. She asserts that:

Kambili's 'nervousness', if we can actually call it that, is less to do with cultural dislocation than with growing up in the shadow of a father who you both love and fear in an incredible sort of way, and not quite having a voice because you haven't been allowed to. There really aren't two cultures so to speak because she finds her voice within the same culture, in her family as well, just a different branch within the same family. (in Forna, 51)

Kambili therefore "finds her voice" within a perceptibly different cultural milieu from that of Tambu and Nyasha. Nyasha's sense of alienation, for instance, is largely due to her own awareness of the inherent violence and racism of the colonial process. She feels estranged from her family and her society and does not fully identify with either her Shona culture or her English upbringing. She is far more politically conscious than Kambili and criticises the missionaries who employ her father and the colonial machinery by refusing to eat the food he buys with the salary they pay him. Nyasha's antipathy towards Shona culture is also recognition of the gender inequalities that she and the women in her family experience. Kambili on the other hand, as Adichie indicates grapples with the pain of living with an abusive father. Eugene's adoption of British bourgeois etiquette and his European brand of

Christianity are significant for Kambili's maturation but his influence is not unmitigated or absolute. Through her interactions with Aunty Ifeoma, her cousins and Father Amadi after visits to their aunt's home in the university town of Nsukka, Kambili begins to identify of a mode of being that differs from that of her father. Thus Adichie's novel is less an evocation of the past that perpetuates binaries between European and African cultures than an attempt at understanding an already hybridised present, a concept I will return to later in the chapter.

As an alternative matriarchal figure, Aunty Ifeoma is contrasted with Beatrice who though attentive to her children nevertheless conjures feelings of resentment in Kambili for what Kambili regards as her mother's complicity in Papa's abuse. Her antipathy is illustrated most vividly as Kambili lies on a hospital bed after a severe beating from her father, punishment for having brought home a painting of her grandfather, whom Papa decries as a pagan:

Mama reached out to hold my hand. Her face was puffy from crying, and her lips were cracked with bits of discoloured skin peeling off. I wished I could get up and hug her, and yet I wanted to push her away, to push her so hard that she would topple over in her chair. (213)

Kambili's incapacity to articulate her thoughts given the silenced personal and social spaces she occupies means, on the one hand, that she is unable to confess her ambivalent feelings towards her mother but, on the other, that she is able to reveal the secret familial abuse by placing emphasis on the body. She can only enunciate her anger towards her mother by resorting to a language of violence for Beatrice appears to do nothing to protect her children. Mama's grief at the near death of her daughter at the hands of her husband can therefore also be revealed and understood. The wounded bodies that Kambili describes call attention to themselves forcefully and in a sense allow for a breaking of the silence that pervades the Achike household. Thus Mama's grotesque "puffy" eyes and "peeling" lips are Kambili's attempts at expressing the inexpressible; the deep trauma and pain she and her family have undergone. She resorts to figurative expression to describe her own hurt body: "My whole

body is on fire [...] I did not want to feel the breathing pain at my side. I did not want to feel the heavy hammer knocking in my head” (212–213). Kambili’s language reflects Elaine Scarry’s understanding of the body in pain. According to Scarry:

physical pain – unlike any other state of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language. (5)

The result is that the attempt to articulate pain linguistically can only be achieved through an attempt at expressing the immediacy of the experience. Kambili resorts to a use of adjectives that Scarry argues can only be found in two categories, those that “specify an external agent of the pain, a weapon that is pictured producing the pain; and the second specifies bodily damage that is pictured as accompanying the pain” (15). Thus Kambili describes a hammer banging in her head to illustrate the intensity of the pain she feels despite the obvious fact that there is no literal hammer in her head. She converts the word “pain” into a noun with the adverb “breathing” personifying it to illustrate the seemingly life-like quality of the hurt in her body. The image of the damaged, abject body thus haunts the novel.

The wounded female body is, however, differentiated from that of the wounded male body. Kambili and Beatrice are assaulted specifically for their perceived femaleness not merely because Eugene is a victim of violence who inevitably repeats the cycle of violence. In one of the first incidences of physical violence in the novel, Eugene strikes Beatrice for requesting permission to remain in the car during one of the family’s weekly visits to the parish priest’s house after Mass. She is apparently feeling ill, suffering from morning sickness, but Eugene compels her to leave the car. Beatrice not only attempts to diffuse the heightened tension by acceding to Eugene’s demands but in doing so denies her own physical pain and discomfort. The assault that follows the visit to Father Benedict later that afternoon occurs in the privacy of Eugene and Beatrice’s bedroom. It is thus only made visible through the “swift heavy thuds” (32) that Kambili hears emanating from her parents room and the

“trail of blood” (33) that trickles down the stairs after Eugene takes Beatrice to the hospital. The assault causes her to miscarry and Beatrice returns home with “vacant” (34) eyes that Kambili describes as being “like the eyes of those mad people who wandered around the roadside garbage dumps in town, pulling grimy, canvas bags with life fragments inside” (34). Kambili recalls another such beating where Eugene whips both Beatrice and Kambili with his buckled leather belt for allowing Kambili to eat cereal before Mass when they should have been fasting. The incident occurs after Beatrice, concerned for Kambili, encourages her to eat because she is experiencing menstrual cramps. Jaja attempts to defend Beatrice and Kambili by claiming that he allowed Kambili to eat the bowl of cornflakes and is whipped as well (101-102). Eugene’s fear and panic that the female bodies of his wife and daughter, with their biological functions like menstruation and pregnancy, cannot be regulated or controlled manifests itself in violent action. Both of these events are tied to the consumption of food and, in Beatrice’s case, the body’s rejection of it.

Food in the Achike home holds primary importance. As I have previously mentioned, some of Kambili’s most significant memories of her family occur around the dinner table, a formalised space that is a focal point in their interactions. What the family chooses to eat, how food is prepared and the cultural habits and designations surrounding food mean that the dining room is not merely where the family shares a meal. Roland Barthes argues that “to eat is a behaviour that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviours” (33). The presence of a specific room from which to dine with specific etiquette and rules that govern behaviour within that space corresponds with a notion of food as a “sign” that is both implicated in and reveals underlying hegemonic discourses. Bhari posits that food is a “metonymic token of a system that commodifies women’s bodies and labor and sustains male authority” (3) an assertion that is exemplified in the controlled food rituals in Kambili’s home.

Eugene's role as the patriarchal head in the home ascribes him the power to control how meals in the home are consumed. He spares no expense to ensure that his family is well-fed. His seeming generosity, however, masks the inherent dominion that he exercises over his family. Beatrice may be accorded free reign over the sourcing of the food and its preparation but she does so not for her own or the children's nourishment or pleasure but that of her husband. Many of the dishes Beatrice prepares with the assistance of her house-help Sisi are indigenous to the country: "Jollof rice" (Adichie 32), a type of spicy fried rice, is served with "fist-size" (32) amounts of fish and vegetables while mashed yam or "fufu" (11) is accompanied by soup with chunks of beef and fish. But despite the variety of the food offered, Eugene's threatening presence means that for the most part, Kambili, Beatrice and Jaja eat as a precautionary measure against any assault; to decline would be viewed as a challenge to Eugene's authority. Meal times are regulated through timetables that he draws up for the family, schedules with "meticulously drawn lines, in black ink, cut across each day, separating study from siesta, siesta from family time, family time from eating, eating from prayer, prayer from sleep" (24). Beatrice and the children therefore live in a state of perpetual fear under Eugene's constant scrutiny and surveillance. This heightened state of fear and anxiety is emblematic of the extreme emotional and psychological stress under which the family resides. Adichie's novel thus effectively explores issues of trauma and silence.

Nervous Conditions: Negotiating Spaces of Trauma and Silence

Beatrice's submissive behaviour and eventual adoption of violence as a reprisal against her husband's despotism mirrors that of the female characters in Dangaremba's novel *Nervous Conditions*. Like Maiguru, Tambudzai's aunt, Beatrice exhibits symptoms of hysteria similar to those that Maiguru portrays. According to postcolonial theorist, Sue Thomas:

The hysteric takes several forms: most spectacularly, anorexia nervosa; more banally, angelic housewifely submission, the horizontal violence of naming women witches, the repression of

loss which manifests itself in obsessively repeated justifying myths which entrench colonial rule, and “bad nerves” which accompany playing the part of the “good kaffir” of the colonizer’s imagination. (26)

Through the portrayal of these female characters both Adichie and Dangarembga underscore the multifaceted nature of the colonial process by incorporating gender. While Beatrice and Maiguru may not be reacting directly against the coloniser, both react against the tyranny of their colonised husbands. Adichie further extends Fanon’s understanding of colonial violence to include the battered female victim of the colonised male, who murders her oppressor. Despite their middle-class status, both Beatrice and Maiguru are nevertheless compelled to reside under an oft violent patriarchy. Their social ranking as women married to wealthy educated men does not insulate them from the abuse they and their children experience.

Thus Beatrice may not adopt the baby talk and childish rendering of her speech that Maiguru does or act out her “repressed rage” (27) like Nyasha through the rejection of food but her passivity, dependence and overcompliance are all conditioned responses that act as defense mechanisms against the abuse she experiences. After each beating, and even after she miscarries, she never mentions the incidents and never cries. Instead, she enacts coping strategies, including the careful scrubbing and washing of her ballerina figurines lined on the wall in the living room. Her reluctance to confront Eugene, protect her children or take any punitive legal measures is in part because of the inevitable silences that pervade the home. “Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defense,” trauma theorist, Judith Herman, points out, adding that “if secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that nobody listens,” (Herman qtd. in Lloyd 214). Through the establishment of a rigid secrecy Eugene thus ensures that neither Beatrice, Jaja nor Kambili can challenge him either in private or in public. As Christopher Ouma indicates the “silence is pervasive, muffling, choking and violating the narrator, her sibling and her mother’s senses of the self” (*Childhood in Contemporary*

Nigerian Fiction 61). This oppressive silence is only broken after Jaja and Kambili's encounter with Auntie Ifeoma and their cousins in Nsukka, a visit the impact of which I will discuss more fully later in the chapter.

The recourse to silence is, however, as David Lloyd suggests, the effect of the traumatic event itself which entails a "violent intrusion and a sense of utter objectification that annihilates the person as subject or agent" (214). Consequently, Kambili struggles to enunciate her thoughts and finds that she is incapable of relating to either her classmates or her cousins. She "wills words to come" (Adichie 52) out of her mouth but stutters and whispers instead or replies in monosyllables. The disparity between what she says and what she actually thinks is evidenced in her inability to speak openly about either her father's violent episodes or the rigid rules that govern her life. Thus when Amaka makes the presumption that her cousin is merely posturing, when Kambili tells her they do not watch a lot of television, Kambili does not correct her. Instead she reveals the extent to which her intent and her actions, her thoughts and words do not cohere: "I wanted to say I was sorry, that I did not want her to dislike us for not watching satellite. [...] we did not watch TV. Papa did not pencil in TV time on our schedules" (79). This sense of "dissociation" and "dislocation" as well as "the will-to-forget or amnesia" (Lloyd 214) that Kambili displays are an inherent part of the trauma she continually experiences. At school Kambili tries to study while the stress of the reprimand that awaits her should she not take first position makes her feel like she is "balancing a sack of gravel on her head" (52). This haunting image exemplifies her alienated, traumatised self. She confesses that the words in her textbook keep turning into a "red blur," projecting the grief and sense of loss she feels because of her mother's miscarriage, as she "still sees her baby brother's spirit strung together by narrow lines of blood" (52).

Beatrice's own reactions to these and other episodes of trauma can also be viewed as a combination of what is referred to as "learned helplessness" and "learned hopefulness."

Psychologist Geraldine B. Stahly argues that the battered woman is "specially punished for behaviour that asserts her independence from the batterer" and "rewarded for behaviors that make it more difficult for her to leave" (365). Hope that things will change and "gestures of kindness and concern the man shows during a loving reconciliation stage" (256) maintain the power dynamics in the relationship. The violent abusive relationship follows a three stage cycle beginning with the tension-building phase where the batterer "becomes edgy and lashes out in anger" (363). His "demands and accusations may be exaggerated and unreasonable" (363) as the woman tries to assuage his anger, appearing even more conciliatory. Inevitably, however, an assault will occur heralding the second stage, "the acute battering episode" (363). Stahly further explains that the events that lead to the violence are often "mundane and even absurd" (364) but nevertheless result in a brutal attack. The loving reconciliation phase follows soon after with the batterer showing affection for his partner or showering her with gifts.

The episodes of violence in Adichie's novel follow this pattern of abuse quite closely with both Kambili and Jaja emulating their mother's reactions and learned behaviour. Beatrice espouses gratitude for Eugene's provision and often excuses his behaviour while Kambili portrays a deep, somewhat ambivalent, admiration for her father, never overtly criticising him. Offering Beatrice her sympathy after Eugene breaks the figurines at the opening of the novel, for instance, she explains: "I meant to say I am sorry Papa broke your figurines, but the words that came out were, 'I'm sorry your figurines broke, Mama'" (10). Kambili's attachment to her father, while understandable as the natural consequence of a parent-child relationship, speaks to a much more disturbing reality. I would like to suggest that the extreme anxiety and desire to please that she evinces is a hysterical pathology that is symptomatic of

extreme trauma in the form of Stockholm or hostage syndrome. Victims of hostage syndrome often adopt the perspective of the “captor” as their own – believing that the captors are right in their abusive actions (Lundberg-love and Wilkerson 43). Living within the literal and metaphorical prison walls of their family home, Kambili identifies with her father so completely that she deifies him:

most of what Papa said sounded important [...] I would focus on his lips, the movement, and sometimes, I forgot myself, sometimes I wanted to stay like that forever, listening to his voice, to the important things he said. It was the same way I felt when he smiled, his face breaking open like a coconut with the white brilliant meat inside. (Adichie 25)

Kambili displays such a fervent attachment to her father that upon hearing about his death she confesses that she had never considered the “possibility that he would die” (287) that “he could die [...] he had seemed immortal” (287). Her reaction to her mother’s confession is one of anger and disbelief. She screams at her mother and shakes her until her brother has to pull her away (291).

Beatrice, on the other hand, expresses disbelief at the brutality of the attack that results in Kambili’s hospitalisation after Eugene rips apart the painting of Papa-Nnukwu but she never condemns the attacks themselves or indicates Eugene’s responsibility for his actions: “It has never happened like this before. He has never punished her like this before” (214).

Beatrice’s description of the beating as a punishment implies that responsibility lies with Kambili and not with her father therefore excusing his behaviour. Beatrice’s choice not to incriminate Eugene is a result of years of denial, a learned hopefulness that views Papa in messianic terms as the father of her children and her saviour from a life of singleness and drudgery. In a revealing conversation with Kambili after Beatrice discovers that she is pregnant, she explains to her daughter why she chooses to stay with Eugene:

You know after you came and I had miscarriages, the villagers started to whisper. The members of our *umunna* even sent people to your father to urge him to have children with someone else. So many people had willing daughters, many of them university graduates too. They might have had sons and taken over our home and driven us out. [...] But you father stayed with me, with us. (20)

Beatrice expresses similar sentiments when speaking with Aunty Ifeoma during their family trip to their rural home in Abba for Christmas: “a woman with children and no husband, what is that? [...] A husband crowns a woman’s life” (75). Under the constant scrutiny of Eugene’s extended family, Beatrice is expected to provide a sufficient number of heirs. Her statements imply that the family believe she is responsible for the deaths of her unborn children. The miscarriages are thus met with suspicion as the burden of child-bearing is placed on the woman. The silence surrounding Eugene’s violent behaviour which results in two recounted miscarriages in the text also means that Beatrice is maligned and victimised for her husband’s abuse.

Beatrice’s identity can be understood within an African feminist framework in which she is defined primarily by her role as wife and mother. African feminism celebrates these roles and asserts their importance for many African societies. Feminists like Filomena Steady assert that “African women gained status from their role as mothers” (Steady qtd. in Cousins 23) while Oyeronke Oyewumi maintains that motherhood plays a central role in the political and social life of many African communities. Motherhood occurs primarily within the context of marriage in either systems of monogamy or polygamy. Marriage, however, does not occur as an individualistic project but as a bond between two clans. Thus, women are accorded “agency and power” (13) in societies that recognise the value of the individual within the context of community. Women are also empowered by a large community of mothers, sisters and other female relations who not only support one another but offer a sense of camaraderie and friendship that is distinct in its character from that of men. Specifically among the Igbo, children and large families were considered more valuable than money as Ifi Amadiume points out:

The wealthy had more agricultural produce, larger numbers of livestock and people to who would carry on the trading and marketing of surplus [...] Poor people merely subsisted; diet demonstrated wealth difference, as the poor could not afford fish and meat. (Amadiume 31)

Adichie's novel, however, reveals the more reductive aspects of the focus on motherhood in African feminism by highlighting the more insidious aspects of a system that in contemporary society insists that a man of Eugene's "stature cannot have just two children" (75). She also challenges the notion that it should be Beatrice's responsibility to provide him with the necessary number of sons to continue his lineage. The novel illustrates that Beatrice's failure to meet the requirements of Igbo cultural standards means that she is stigmatised and faces the threat of abandonment. Thus Beatrice is doubly oppressed by the effects of Eugene's religious violence and Igbo patriarchy. In this instance, the elevation of motherhood is pictured not as a redemptive characteristic of African feminism but as a tool of hegemony. In a salient critique of African feminist discourses that argue for the centrality of motherhood to the identity of African women, Adichie's novel reveals the more sinister aspects of such a focus.

Beatrice's role as the wife of the *omelora* or the titled head of the clan and the mother of his children does not accord her a greater sense of agency. In fact, the class disparities between Beatrice and the rural women in the rest of the *umunna* mean that she is isolated and cannot take advantage of the possible friendships that she might gain from their association. Though the village women treat her with a measure of deference they only do so because of her middle-class status. Playing the role of the community leader, Eugene ensures that the family arrives "prepared to feed the whole village at Christmas" (56) but it is customary for the wives of the *ummuna* who cook the meals. Beatrice only participates as an observer, handing out salt, spices and utensils. Even here Beatrice has little control; the women only accept her help because they know that she will not openly criticise them for carrying home the leftovers of the meals they prepare. But while the women utilise the backyard, the family's food is "cooked in the kitchen on the gas cooker" (56) and they eat separately in the dining

room. The oft celebrated presence of a larger community where the private merges with the public does not alter the hierarchical discourses that structure society.

Nevertheless, it is the historical fluidity of gender relations among the Igbo that provides Beatrice with the alternative space she needs to express herself in a setting that is less restrictive than their home in the city, in Enugu. She may not be able to relate more intimately with the other women in the *umunna* but her relationship with Aunty Ifeoma is much more amenable. Aunty Ifeoma refers to Beatrice colloquially as “*Nwunye m*” (73) or “my wife” (73), a term of endearment that Beatrice tells Kambili means that Aunty Ifeoma “accepts her” (73). While Kambili is “aghast that a woman called another woman my ‘wife’” (73) and Eugene disparages the practice as part of what he refers to as “ungodly traditions” (73), it nevertheless indicates an alternative sense of family. Beatrice is not just married to her husband but to her extended family as well. Aunty Ifeoma becomes a confidant with whom Beatrice can break some of the silences that shroud her family. While she does not confess the abuse in her relationship with Eugene, it is with Aunty Ifeoma that Beatrice is able to enunciate some of her fears, expressing her frustration and ambivalence towards her social positioning as Eugene’s wife. Aunty Ifeoma also challenges Beatrice’s self-perception; reproaching her for her indebtedness to Eugene for declining to marry a second wife: “Stop it, stop being grateful. If Eugene would have done that, he would have been the loser and not you” (75). She also seems to suggest that Beatrice should take steps to separate herself and her children from his control: “sometimes life begins after marriage ends” (75). Beatrice, however, dismisses these comments retorting: “You and your university talk.” She feels so disempowered that she can never leave her husband as Aunty Ifeoma suggests. Her sense of inferiority stems not only from her husband’s perpetual abuse but from her acceptance of her marginal position within patriarchal discourses. She is not as highly educated as Ifeoma nor does she appear to have the independence or perhaps even desire to develop a professional

career that would accord her a measure of freedom from Eugene's control. Despite this, Kambili, who is seated in the room with the two women, notes for the first time that her mother is "smiling" (75).

The repartee between the two women is the first moment of any real humour in the novel. Its significance may appear to be an overstatement on my part but I would assert that this moment sets the scene for the formative relationship the children develop with their aunt; a relationship that is the catalyst for Jaja, Beatrice and Kambili's transformation. There is only one other occasion that Kambili recalls where Beatrice "does not hide the tiny smile" (256) that appears on her face. The incident occurs after Eugene breaks her figurines, when "everything comes tumbling down" (256). Beatrice may appear to quietly accept the shattering of her figurines but her smile indicates the awareness that Eugene's conflict with Jaja is due to her son's growing independence from his father. Beatrice's ultimate rebellion against Eugene's domination is also the effect of much smaller moments of self-assertion. She is the one who explains the significance of the term *Nwunye m* to Kambili and in doing so questions Eugene's authoritative assumptions. Kambili also recalls several other incidences where Beatrice divulges information that Eugene would not openly discuss. It is Beatrice who reveals to the children that Eugene and Auntie Ifeoma are estranged because of his antipathy towards their grandfather Papa-Nnukwu. Alone, without Eugene's overbearing presence, Beatrice and Auntie Ifeoma make plans to take the children to the traditional festival of *Ara*, one of the first excursions that Jaja and Kambili undertake without his supervision. The two women collude with each other and together manage to subvert Eugene's authority by adopting different strategies. Beatrice reverts to silence, declining to respond to Eugene's questioning looks while Auntie Ifeoma offers to take Jaja and Kambili "sightseeing" (77) appealing to his sense of duty and piety: "is it not Christmas we are celebrating eh?" (78). Eugene's piety and neurotic preference for order and civility are viewed as markers of his

education and Catholic upbringing among missionaries but in actuality are a facet of his hybrid identity.

Purple Flowers and the Complexities of a Hybridised Present

Eugene is subjected to “a double command” (Russ 1107). He must be like the coloniser but at the same time is regarded as other, “situated somewhere between difference and similitude, at the vanishing point of subjectivity” (1107). It is this ambivalence that postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha argues undermines the authority of colonial discourse. For mimicry, he asserts, “is the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power” (“The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” 126). But it is also “a sign of the inappropriate” (126), one that “coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both “normalized” knowledges and disciplinary powers” (126). In Bhabharian terms mimicry is therefore not merely an exercise in the colonised mirroring the coloniser’s behaviour. Its slippages and distortions provide spaces of resistance, defying the creation of an untroubled hybrid identity where two cultures merge into a harmonious new and different culture.

Hybridity thus “unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but re-implicates its identifications in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power” (“Signs Taken For Wonders” 154). Eugene’s insistence that the family eat together at the ceremonial dinner table and have their food prepared on a gas stove when they are visiting his relatives in Abba can therefore be read as a caricature of ideas associated with a discourse of manners and civility. In doing so, Adichie’s novel reveals the performative nature of such habits, acting as an implicit critique of the colonial project. Eugene defines Igbo culture primarily through stereotypes. His rejection of his Igbo identity as ‘primitive’ and ‘pagan’ for a more acceptable European one can thus be understood as the

effect of “discriminatory practices” that are engendered within colonial discourse (Bhabha qtd. in Huddart 23). Bhabha further stipulates that the stereotype in colonial discourse is not merely “a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality” (“The Other Question” 27). But rather:

It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations. (“The Other Question” 27)

The stereotype therefore provides the colonial power with the knowledge needed to conduct the colonial project. That process, however, is wrought with anxiety. The coloniser is compelled to work within a framework of perceived superiority while at the same time contending with the contradictions inherent in the civilising project. On the one hand, the stereotype provides a means for control for the coloniser but it resides uneasily along with the ideas of modernisation and progress that presume a higher code of social interaction. In adopting an often violent stance towards the colonised, the coloniser contradicts the very ideal he espouses. This anxiety is exemplified in the coloniser’s interaction with the colonised (Huddart 35-38). The coloniser aims to inscribe his identity upon the colonised but the colonised cannot adopt this identity so fully as to be equal to the coloniser as this would undermine the colonial project. In any case, according to the colonial discourse, the colonised is viewed as incapable of fully assimilating the ‘superior’ identity of the coloniser (Huddart 55).

Thus despite Eugene’s efforts at civility, he is, to use Bhabha’s words, the “effect of a flawed colonial mimesis, in which to be “Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (“The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse” 128). He retains his marginal status as evidenced in his interactions with the ‘white’ characters in the novel. For instance, his relationship with Father Benedict is undergirded by Father Benedict’s assumption of racial and cultural superiority. Despite Eugene’s success as an entrepreneur and community leader, he nevertheless defers to

Father Benedict, adopting the priest's disdain for what he refers to as "native songs" and other Igbo cultural practices (Adichie 4). Eugene has so internalised colonial discourses, however, that he appears incapable of any self-reflectivity in the Bhabharian sense. Rather than adopting a mimicry that challenges colonial hegemony, he is a tragically fragmented figure whose only recourse for the trauma and pain he has experienced is violence. For instance, after discovering his daughter and son have spent the week with their grandfather at their Aunt's house in Nsukka, he tortures Kambili by burning her feet. He explains his actions to his daughter by relating a similar punishment that he experienced at the hands of a priest:

I committed a sin against my own body once. [...] And the good father, the one I lived with while I went to St. Gregory's, came in and saw me. He asked me to boil water for tea. He poured water in a bowl and soaked my hands in it. [...] The good father did it for my own good. (196)

In this sense, I would assert that *Purple Hibiscus* calls into question the notion of mimicry which undergirds Bhabha's ideas of hybridity. Eugene merely replicates the same processes of violence and disenfranchisement that he has experienced. He also does not reject Igbo culture in its totality as he still retains his ascribed status as the autocratic, patriarchal head of the family. Eugene is thus representative of the worst combination of both European and African culture. Furthermore, the violence and terror he inflicts upon the family through his neurotic control of seemingly mundane rituals precludes any easy celebration of mimicry as a space of resistance. At the table, meals are often rife with tension as Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili strive to maintain a sense of calm. Adopting a conciliatory tone, the family often resorts to flattery to placate their father. Nervously trying to assuage Eugene's temper after Jaja refuses to go for communion, for instance, Beatrice attempts to draw his attention away by complimenting the latest product from his factory, something Kambili notes they are compelled to do every time they are given a new one: "They brought the cashew juice this afternoon. I am sure it will sell. [...] It tastes like fresh cashew" (12-13). Kambili notes that

her mother's voice is lower than usual indicating the level of her anxiety as Jaja declines to participate in the conversation and Kambili adds her own: "It's very good Papa" (13).

This shared sense of fear and anxiety is heightened in both Eugene and Beatrice who epitomise the very real and tragic consequences of systematic oppression. Eugene's fragile psyche unravels throughout the text as he slowly veers towards a psychological breakdown. In the incident where he scalds Kambili, he weeps as he pours the hot water over her feet. His words here are worth quoting at length as I would argue that it is not just the brutality of Eugene's actions to which Adichie is calling attention but to his inability to expiate his own pain and break away from the trauma of his experiences:

'Kambili, you are precious.' His voice quivered now, like someone speaking at a funeral, choked with emotion. 'You should strive for perfection. You should not see sin and walk right into it.' He lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it toward my feet. He poured hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen. He was crying now, tears streaming down his face. [...] "That is what you do to yourself when you walk into sin. You burn your feet." (194)

If the emphasis thus far has been primarily on the suffering female body, then Eugene's affective and somatic reaction to his own violence subverts this reading. *Purple Hibiscus* complicates the moral imperative that would require the reader to sympathise with Kambili, the more obvious victim in the situation. Adichie reconfigures the suffering body to include Eugene: the perpetrator of violence. As the narrative develops his bloated, dying body also begins to take prominence. Upon returning from their Aunt's home, Kambili notices that her father's face is covered with "tiny pimples, each with whitish pus at the tips" (252). She is so stunned by his appearance that she declines to hug him or "kiss his forehead" (252), her habitual greeting. His radically altered body not only alienates his daughter but it allows her to view her father with less adulation and this serves to humanise him in her eyes. Eugene, however, dismisses his appearance as an allergic reaction but it is implied at the conclusion of the narrative these are symptoms of the poison Beatrice has been adding to his tea. Eugene's death therefore complicates any simplistic notion of victimhood for his murder not only strips

him of his agency but implicates Beatrice within the systemic violence against which she reacts. On the one hand, she finally takes measures to protect herself and her children but on the other, the fact that she resorts to violence as her only means of escape indicates her powerlessness. The ambivalence of her actions means that she and Eugene can both be read as victim and perpetrator. Thus Beatrice and Eugene's mutual dependence is not just the effect of the colonial process but is a complex relationship that is informed by a variety of intersecting and conflicting discourses.

This ambivalence deviates from Bhabha's concept of 'ambivalence' with its emphasis on the coloniser/colonised dichotomy and is much closer to Sarah Nuttall's conception of the term "entanglement". According to Nuttall:

Entanglement is a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited. It is a term which may gesture towards a relationship or a set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle but which also implies a human foldedness. It works with difference and sameness but also with their limits, their predicaments, their moments of complication. (1)

Entanglement provides a more useful framework for comprehending Adichie's project in *Purple Hibiscus* and the complexities of contemporary Nigerian society evoked in the novel. For instance, in contrast to Eugene's violent repetition of his own oppression, neither Auntie Ifeoma nor Father Amadi can be readily understood merely as mimics of European culture. Rather, they are depictions of a postcolonial identity that merges the past with the present in new and dynamic ways. It is, therefore, apt that the journey out of the silenced spaces of fear that govern Kambili and Jaja's lives begins in Abba at their aunt's instigation and continues in her home in Nsukka where purple hibiscus bloom and the rain brings with it the "smell of freshness" (218). Nsukka is contrasted with the children's home in Enugu with its high walls, plush furniture and extra-large rooms. To quote Ouma at length:

Nsukka, as a place that triggers happy memories, is reminisced in nostalgic tones that are a counterpoint to the traumatic memories and the palpable and repressive silence of Enugu. Hence, this phase of narrative memory is devoid of the monologic grammar of Catholicism and is invested with a different and liberating soundscape and smellscape that heralds a new

sense of the everyday. Nsukka for Kambili is therefore the place of healing, of a contrastive memory. (*Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction*74)

This new beginning is heralded by the words of the Nsukka university motto, “to restore the dignity of man,” that Jaja reads out loud as they drive past the gates towards Auntie Ifeoma’s house. The muted excitement that the two express is contrasted with their aunt’s exuberant welcome as they arrive at the flat which is located in what Kambili describes as a “bland building” with “peeling blue paint” (112). The building is, however, surrounded by a garden which she effusively describes as a “circular burst of bright colours” with “roses and hibiscuses and lilies and ixora and croton growing side by side like a hand-painted wreath” (112). Her use of synaesthesia in describing the flowers in the garden not only illustrates the aforementioned nostalgia with which Kambili remembers her Aunt’s home but also serves as an indication of the transformation that begins to take place. Kambili’s first impressions of her aunt’s flat, however, are also an amalgamation of her classed upbringing and years of conditioned aversion to strangeness. She notices the low height of the roof and compares it to the “high ceilings” in their home that “gave their rooms an airy stillness” (113). The seams on the covers of the cushions on the only sofa in the living room are frayed, the roses in the vase are “plastic” while the hallway is crammed with books and shelves that appear as if they might collapse under the weight of the books (114).

The small cramped apartment heightens Kambili’s apprehension and claustrophobia and she struggles to cope without Eugene’s imposed order; her sense of unease exacerbated by Amaka’s antagonism towards her. While the constricted spaces indicate a measure of economic deprivation this, as Kambili comes to realise, nevertheless does not create a holistic sense of lack. Kambili also observes that “laughter always rang out in Auntie Ifeoma’s house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around the walls, all the rooms” (140) in contrast to the silent whispers and tension that pervade their home. The flat is filled with the noisy camaraderie of a closely bonded family whose intimacy is reflected in the

living space that they share. Unlike the Achike home, there are no sacrosanct, formalised spaces, the living room for instance doubles up as a bedroom that Obiora, Aunty Ifeoma's first-born son, shares with Jaja. Kambili shares Amaka's room while Aunty Ifeoma and her youngest son Chima share the main bedroom. Aunty Ifeoma may not be able to provide separate bedrooms for each of her children as does her brother but the affection she showers upon them and then shows towards Kambili and Jaja accords them the freedom "to act and to exist" (Ouma in "Childhood (s) in Purple Hibiscus" 76).

The sense of unease that Kambili feels at her arrival slowly dissipates as the strange becomes familiar and she and her brother begin to break out of their habituated silence. The mundane rituals such as meal times once associated with Papa's control no longer carry the same level of fear and anxiety. Meals are prepared and shared with ease and are not pre-empted by lengthy prayers that display a regard for the rite but hold little or no substantive value. In fact, the opposite occurs in Nsukka, Kambili and Jaja are confronted by a spirituality that is energised by its exuberant acceptance of the corporeal and a rejection of the fanaticism embodied in Papa's practice of Catholicism. In Aunty Ifeoma's house, prayers are punctuated by Igbo songs and requests for joy and laughter. Kambili's and by extension Eugene's ingrained acceptance of a Catholicism infused with assumptions of European supremacy is undermined and ultimately revealed to be lacking. As Fanon argues, the European missionaries were both complicit and actively involved in the colonial process:

The Church in the colonies is a white man's Church, a foreigners' Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the white man, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor. And as we know, in this story many are called but few are chosen.
(*Wretched* 32)

Adichie's depiction of Aunty Ifeoma's home, however, challenges Fanon's definitive assertion. Instead, what is vividly illustrated is an alternative narrative that speaks to Nigeria's entangled present, to use Nuttall's term, where "social relations" are "complicated" and "twisted together" through an often contradictory process that can be both oppressive and

liberating (Nuttall 1). Aunty Ifeoma is therefore a recuperative force in the novel challenging the racist assumptions that both Kambili and Jaja have imbibed in their religious practice. As I have previously suggested, she also functions as a surrogate mother figure for Kambili and Jaja, who not only interrogates the concept of motherhood as institutionalised within patriarchal discourse but also allows for an alternative reading of motherhood as experience. Ifeoma does not struggle with the “burdens of womanhood” in quite the same way as Beatrice does. She refuses to define her identity primarily through and in opposition to masculinity. Thus she acts as a figure of balance and embodies a new conception of selfhood, one able to interrogate and resist hegemonic discourses and in so doing helping to shape a new generation. It is significant then that the purple hibiscus growing in her small garden should capture Jaja’s attention (128). He notices the flower as Aunty Ifeoma takes him around the garden. The purple hibiscus, a product of an experiment conducted by Aunty Ifeoma’s botanist friend, is a metaphorical representation of the novel’s imperative for change.

The flower embodies the optimism engendered in the budding friendship between Kambili, Jaja and their cousins and in their restorative albeit brief relationship with Papa-Nnukwu. As her father’s “male daughter,” to borrow Amadiume’s term, Aunty Ifeoma cares for her ailing father in her home until his death, inadvertently giving Kambili and Jaja uninhibited access to their grandfather. The term “male daughter” refers to a woman among the Nnobi, an Igbo precolonial society, who has been “accorded full male status in the absence of a son in order to safeguard their father’s obi, line of descent and the property associated with it” (Amadiume 34). Aunty Ifeoma takes on the role of contemporary male daughter after Eugene severs all relational bonds with their father. A symbol of a more indigenous mode of being, Papa-Nnukwu is charged with the role of ensuring that the intergenerational ties that have been broken between himself and his son are maintained with his grandchildren. His presence in Aunty Ifeoma’s home further configures her space as a site

of freedom, a hybrid space where the past and the present meet in a less fraught relationship than that evidenced in Eugene's home in Enugu. In his embrace of Igbo spirituality and defiance of Eugene's imposed Catholicism, Papa-Nnukwu counters the hegemonic colonial discourse that Eugene adopts so readily offering his grandchildren an alternative mode of being. As Cooper asserts "through the body and spirit of her grandfather" Kambili is able to rebel against her father's dominance; she dwells not on the lesson of the harsh, so-called Christian punishment, but on the Igbo traditionalist who is a kind and benevolent force" (119).

The sense of alienation she experiences at her inability to bond emotionally with her grandfather as she watches her cousins' uninhibited interactions with Papa-Nnukwu is mitigated by two incidences. The first of which occurs when Kambili witnesses her grandfather's prayer ritual and the second is the pivotal moment when she declines to part with the painting of Papa-Nnukwu after she is confronted with it by her father. On one particular morning, Aunty Ifeoma wakes Kambili up early to witness her grandfather's prayer ritual. Standing unobtrusively against a wall Kambili notes that Papa-Nnukwu's "lips quivered as he spoke" and his "Igbo words flowed into each other, as if writing his speech would result in one long word" (Adichie 167). His utilisation of Igbo in his incantations recuperates not just the language itself which has been relegated to the realm of the primitive within colonial discourse but also legitimates the Igbo history and culture that Eugene so vehemently rejects. Kambili's recollected narrative emphasises not just Papa-Nnukwu's verbal petitions to the ancestors calling on them to protect his children but his bodily comportment as well (Cooper 120). Rising from his hunched over posture, Kambili describes her grandfather's body revealing her changing outlook:

When Papa-Nnukwu rose and stretched, his entire body, like the bark of the gnarled gmelina tree in our yard, captured the gold shadows from the lamp flame in its many furrows and ridges. Even the age spots that dotted his hands and legs gleamed. I did not look away, although it was sinful to look upon another person's body. [...] He was still smiling as I quietly

turned and went back to the bedroom. I never smiled after we said the rosary back home. None of us did. (Adichie 167-168)

Papa-Nnukwu's ageing body is rendered in words that convey a transcendent spirituality absent from Eugene's and, by extension, Kambili and Jaja's own Catholicism. This sense of the numinous expressed through Papa-Nnukwu's body challenges Kambili's puritanical denial of the body as "sinful" humanising Papa-Nnukwu in his young granddaughter's eyes. This incident accords even greater significance to Kambili's refusal to part with the painting of her grandfather. Curled up in a foetal position around the shredded pieces of the painting on the floor of her bedroom, Kambili remains defiant as Papa's blows reign down on her body. The painting "is a metonym, part of the whole of Papa-Nnukwu" (Cooper 120) and is emblematic of the spirit of freedom and creativity embodied in her grandfather and her aunt's family. Therefore, acceding to Papa's instructions to "get up" and "get away from that painting" (Adichie 210) would be tantamount to denying her grandfather as well as everything she has learned and gained at Nsukka. The purple hibiscus that Jaja replants in the garden in Enugu serves a similar purpose as the painting for Kambili. It offers a sentimental connection to the past but heralds a new mode of being and a more positive future. This possibility of change is symbolically represented in Kambili's foetal position, a metaphorical rebirth that is, however, inextricably tied to violence.

Nevertheless, Adichie's novel does not merely reify Igbo customs and beliefs polarising them against Eugene's distorted version of Christianity rather, as Cooper asserts, the novel's goal is to infuse the two in a hybridised spirituality (120) embodied in both Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi's Catholicism. Father Amadi is depicted as the symbol of a new African Christianity. Contrasted with Eugene, he represents a new type of Nigerian masculinity, one that embraces a spirituality that portends freedom and not legalistic rituals steeped in fear. Within the novel's Christian epistemology, Father Amadi acts as a challenge to the racism embodied in Father Benedict and Eugene. In what I would assert is Adichie's

attempt to re-historicise African Christianity, the divine is not necessarily aligned with ‘whiteness’ and its European antecedents. I utilise the term African Christianity as opposed to Christianity in Africa following cultural theorist and historian Ogbu U. Kalu who argues for a re-writing of Christianity on the continent that not only incorporates African perspectives but also challenges perceptions of Africans as passive recipients of a seemingly more dominant European religion. Instead, he calls for a church historiography that recognises the intricacies of indigenous African belief systems and cosmologies and the impact they continue to have on the contemporary Christian church in Africa (Kalu 8-9). Thus, when Auntie Ifeoma and Father Amadi take the children on a trip to Aokpe, “a tiny village in Benue” where a sighting of the “Blessed Virgin” is said to have occurred, *Purple Hibiscus* is inscribing African voices into a global Catholic historiography (Adichie 99). Kambili’s experience of the apparition is also described in communal terms as a “red glow on her hand” and “a smile on the face of the rosary-bedecked man whose arm rubbed against hers” while “the ground underneath (is) covered in petals of fire” (274-275).

Adichie’s emphasis on colour and flowers recalls Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*. In both novels, the colour purple is symbolic of vitality and difference. It is integral as a metaphor for the growth and maturation of the two novels’ protagonists, Walker’s Celie and Adichie’s Kambili. Both female characters survive domestic violence from their father-figures and, in Celie’s case, the added dimension of sexual assault and racial discrimination. Thus “the color purple is encoded within the novel as a sign of indomitable female spirit” (Abbandonato 1113). Celie and Kambili emerge as more open and self-aware characters, able to express themselves more fully as autonomous subjects. This optimistic vision is further developed in Kambili’s growing sense of freedom at the conclusion of *Purple Hibiscus*. Having delivered the news to Jaja that he will be released from prison after a three-year

internment, Kambili is jubilant and for the first time in the novel speaks readily about the future:

‘We’ll take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we’ll go to America to visit Aunty Ifeoma,’ I say. ‘We’ll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I’ll plant ixiora so we can suck the juices on the flowers.’ I am laughing. I reach out and place my hand around Mama’s shoulder and she leans towards me and smiles. Above, clouds like dyed cotton wool hang low, so low I feel I can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them. The new rains will come down soon. (306-307)

Yet, I would like to posit that this positive ending is problematised by the events in the narrative, making this a much more dystopic novel than its conclusion would seem to suggest. An allegorical reading of the novel might view Kambili’s exuberance at the close of the novel as indicative of a more optimistic future for Nigeria. The suggestion seems to be that despite the nation’s troubled past, a new generation of young people like Jaja and Kambili will be able to steer the country in a different direction. The “new rains” bring with them the potential for change. As Cheryl Stobie argues:

Adichie pays tribute to the spirit of survival, to the power of humour and intelligent criticism and the possibility of social reform. More effective than the Gothic destruction of the character, Eugene, is the set of practices that suggest alternatives to absolutism, tyranny and infallibility. These centre around indigeneity rather than the fawning adoption of colonial and fanatically purist mind-sets, around the multiplicity of debate and around the possibilities of autonomous femininity, hybridity and creative change. (428)

This change is still, however, only possible with the death of the oppressive, patriarchal father figure. Even after Eugene’s death, Jaja remains trapped in discourses that call for him to adopt a heroic masculine role whose inevitable result is imprisonment. This ultimate act of love and sacrifice nevertheless cannot protect his mother from the anguish and trauma of living through three years of her son’s detention. Both mother and son display symptoms of a psychological breakdown and neither one appears to share Kambili’s enthusiasm. Kambili herself confesses that the bond she and her brother shared appears to have been destroyed by his experiences in prison. His eyes have become “hardened” and she wonders if they ever really had “an *asusu anya*, a language of the eyes” with which they could communicate without words (305). Not only has Kambili experienced the personal loss of her

father's death but she also has to live with the reality of her mother's guilt and her brother's incarceration. This is not all she has to contend with. Aunty Ifeoma and her cousins immigrate to the United States after Ifeoma is sacked from her lecturing post at the university. She is implicated in a series of student riots because she declines to support the corrupt practices of the university's administration. The novel suggests that life under these conditions is unsustainable. Corruption and state failure mean that, despite her independence and self-sufficiency or perhaps because of them, Ifeoma is forced to leave the country. With their departure, Kambili and Jaja no longer have the same holistic sense of family to which they had become accustomed in Nsukka. In addition, Kambili's relationship with Father Amadi seems futile. Though she professes to still have a romantic attachment to the young priest, he has dedicated his life to the Church and will therefore always retain a platonic distance.

Thus, it is my contention that the trauma and pain that Kambili and her family experience prevents any simplistic acceptance of an idealised future. Ifeoma and her children, for instance, immigrate for a seemingly better life in the United States but in their letters to Kambili and Beatrice, Amaka and her mother both express reservations about their new life. Amaka writes that though "there has never been a power outage and hot water runs from the tap (they) don't laugh anymore [...] because (they) don't have the time to laugh, because (they) don't even see one another" (301). To make ends meet Ifeoma has to work two jobs, one at a community college and another at a pharmacy. Kambili astutely notes that her aunt writes about "the things that she misses and the things that she longs for, as if she ignores the present to dwell on the past and the future" (301). Ifeoma's nostalgia can be understood as a coping mechanism to deal with the challenges she and her children face living as migrants in America estranged from friends and family. *Purple Hibiscus* therefore does not provide easy answers to any of the questions and issues it raises. The novel compels its readers to take cognisance of the complicated, entangled relationships that are portrayed in Kambili's

recollected narrative. Its open-ended conclusion allows for a more nuanced understanding of the postcolonial subjectivities by not only directing attention towards the revelations of abuse within the Achike family but also to the larger social and cultural processes that fuel that abuse.

CHAPTER TWO

Nothing Good Will Come to You: Growing up Female and the Politics of Gender in Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come*

In my country, women are praised the more they surrender their right to protest. In the end they may die with nothing but selflessness to pass on to their daughters; a startling legacy like tears down a parched throat. (Sefi Atta *Everything Good Will Come* 179)

A woman was used to humiliation by the time she reached adulthood. She could wear it like a crown, tilt it for effect even, and dare anyone to question to her. A man would wear his like an oversized cloak. (Sefi Atta *Everything Good Will Come* 171)

Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* exemplifies what postcolonial critic Pius Adesanmi has described as a literary "aesthetics of pain" evoking a world where the hopes and dreams" of its characters have been "tragically atrophied by the Nigerian system" (Adesanmi qtd. in Hewett 81). Like Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Atta's debut novel centres on fraught domestic relationships that are marked by on-going episodes of violence and death. Thus the three texts in this study can be read as postcolonial trauma narratives, which grapple with the implications of long-term traumatic events not just on individuals but on whole communities. Postcolonial trauma narratives contest the construction of trauma as an individuated experience as has been traditionally understood and attempt to provide alternative conceptions to the more "Western" theoretical and diagnostic models" of trauma (Craps and Buelens 3). Laurie Vickroy asserts that these novels "attest to the frequency of trauma and its importance as a multicontextual social issue, as it is a consequence of political ideologies, colonization, war, domestic violence, poverty, and so forth" (Vickroy 2). Stefi Craps and Gert Buelens offer a similar perspective:

A narrow focus on individual psychology ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse. Indeed, the psychologization of social suffering encourages the idea that recovery from the traumas of colonialism is basically a matter of the individual witness gaining linguistic control over his or her pain. Immaterial recovery—psychological healing—risks becoming privileged over material recovery: reparation or restitution and, more broadly, the transformation of a wounding political, social, and economic system. (4)

Through its female protagonists *Everything Good Will Come*, therefore, calls attention to the larger social and political environment in which Enitan and Sheri live as well as the culturally specific modes of behaviour that both women adopt as children and as adults. The novel demands the substantive reformation of a patriarchal and classed society that is characterised by gender, economic and political inequalities.

Written in the first-person, *Everything Good Will Come* commences with a young eleven-year-old Enitan, struggling to enunciate her frustration and emotional distress living with her feuding parents. Her inability to voice her pain is as much an individual reaction as it is a cultural one. As a young daughter, it is taboo for her to argue with her parents or to engage the adults around her in a manner that might be deemed rebellious or irreverent. Her silence is thus only mitigated by her friendship with Sheri. Despite their cultural and religious differences the two girls become confidants. Enitan and Sheri also function as literary doppelgangers or doubles whose friendship Atta utilises to challenge the various discourses that govern the children's lives. Enitan's childhood memories and experiences as an adult are also interwoven with the political events orchestrated by the militarist state. Two coups take place in the course of the novel with Enitan becoming a more vocal critic of the regime as the narrative progresses. Her growing political activism is intricately tied to her defiance of patriarchal discourses in her domestic life, culminating in her divorce from her husband at the conclusion of the novel. For Atta, the struggles for gender emancipation and for political freedom are not mutually exclusive. I further concur with Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi who speaking of contemporary African women writers, contends:

These women do not separate one form of oppression from another; neither do they advocate such a separation as might only sensationalize certain issues and sweep equally important issues under the carpet, reinforcing the general ignorance and neglect of the problems of African women. The experience of identity, be it constituted or constituting; and the experience of difference, be it racial or sexual; and the process of reconstructing subjectivity – these are all experienced and lived out simultaneously in the realm of specific sexual politics. (Nfah-Abbenyi 13-14)

Everything Good Will Come, however, appears laboured in places and struggles with a narrowness of characterisation. Specifically, the male characters are depicted in a manner that evokes gendered stereotypes of African male sexuality and behaviour; a criticism that can also be levelled at Unigwe's *On Black Sister's Street*. Many of the male characters in Unigwe's novel are portrayed as having gargantuan proportions with large protruding stomachs epitomising their literal and metaphorical greed and immorality. I will provide a much more detailed discussion of the male characters later in the chapter. Suffice it to say, that both novels present male characters as primarily villainous in comparison to the female characters who are much more fully realised. Conversely, one could, also argue that the frustration and alienation the reader experiences at the somewhat stilted and one-dimensional characterisation is a strategic narrative device that the author utilises to emphasise the profound anxiety experienced by the novel's female characters as they attempt to navigate their lives in the African metropolis.

Postcolonial Trauma Narratives and the Ambivalent Spaces of Childhood

At the outset, Enitan displays a precocity that reveals her antipathy towards any attempts at a gendered socialisation:

At an age when other Nigerian girls were masters at ten-ten, the game in which we stamped our feet in rhythm and tried to outwit our partners with sudden knee jerks, my favourite moments were spent on the jetty pretending to fish. My worst was to hear my mother's shout from her kitchen window; 'Enitan, come and help in here.' (Atta 7)

A deeply religious woman, Enitan's mother Arin, who is also referred to as 'Mama Enitan,' constantly castigates her daughter for what she regards as her lack of appropriate feminine behaviour. On the other hand, her father, Bandele Sunday Taiwo, encourages his daughter's independence. For most of the novel, he is portrayed as the more amiable of the two parents. Nicknamed, 'Sunny,' by his friends, Enitan's father, who is a lawyer, does not appear to usurp his daughter's sense of self by imposing patriarchal codes of dominance. Enitan thus appears

closer to Sunny who treats her with more overt affection and accords her more freedom than her mother. The relative ease with which she relates to her father is, however, rendered ambivalent given Sunny and Arin's troubled marriage. Enitan's preference for the jetty and her desire to escape the confines of her familial home is as much about her growing independence as it is about her feuding parents. According to Enitan, Sunny and Arin "had occupied everywhere else with their fallings out; their trespasses unforgivable" (Atta 8). She describes the emotional stress and discomfort she feels as she overhears her parents fighting: "walls could not save me from the shouting. A pillow, if I stuffed my head under it, could not save me. My hands could not, if I clamped them over my ears and stuffed my head under a pillow" (8). Her chance encounter with Sheri, while out playing by herself one day, heralds a new mode of being: one that provides her with a necessary escape from the stifling atmosphere at home.

Sheri initiates the conversation with Enitan, teasing her for snagging her sleeve on the barbed wire fence that separates their two homes, after Enitan accidentally strikes their gardener with a catapult. Sheri is the daughter of a polygamous chief and is of mixed heritage with a Nigerian father and a British mother(12). When the two girls meet for the first time, Sheri is dressed in a "pink skirt and her white top ends just above her navel. With her short afro, her face looked like a sunflower [...]She wore pink lipstick" (13-14). Her appearance does not conform to the stereotypes Enitan expects. She muses to herself: "my mother would drive her out if she ever saw her. [...]" "Didn't anyone tell her she couldn't wear high heels? Lipstick? Any of that? [...] She was the spoiled one. Sharp mouth and all" (16). Nevertheless, there is an immediate camaraderie between the girls and Arin's disapproval does not deter Enitan from pursuing the friendship. Sheri defies her father's ascetic Islamist principals by adopting a more 'Western' dress. She confesses to Enitan that her father does not allow her to wear lipstick but she waits until he has left the house to put some on and wipes it off when he

returns. Her stepmothers do not chastise her for her actions or report her behaviour to her father: “I kneel before them, help them in the kitchen. They won’t tell” (16). She treats her stepmothers with the cultural deference that is demanded and in return they accord her some leeway to break certain norms. The ease with which the two girls speak to each other illustrates Atta’s vision of childhood as an encumbered, hybrid space. Childhood, as Ouma argues in his discussion of *Purple Hibiscus* allows the writers to “construct a counter-hegemonic account of processes that blur the borders of experience” (Ouma in “Childhood (s) in Purple Hibiscus” 52). Sheri and Enitan’s willingness to relate to each other despite their perceived differences is thus credited to their ability to transgress boundaries as children. Pifer further asserts: “children can claim strength in incompleteness. From an adult’s point of view their vulnerability is an aspect of their power. [...] Not yet complete, they are not yet fully clothed, or formed, by culture” (Pifer 19). Childhood is both a freeing and a restrictive space where Enitan and Sheri “negotiate often conflicting worldviews, concepts” and ideologies (Ouma, “Childhood (s) in Purple Hibiscus” 26-27). The two girls are more unselfconscious and audacious than their parents who never interact with one another despite the close proximity of their homes. Their friendship offers them a safe space from which to experiment with and probe the taboos that are structured around them. Enitan, for instance, attempts to wear lipstick after she first meets Sheri, imitating the colour on her new friend’s lips but she does not have access to ‘real’ lipstick and “takes a red marker and paints her lips” (Atta 18). She also begins unplaiting her hair hoping it will mirror Sheri’s afro which she describes as “fluffy” because “it moved as she talked” (18). Enitan actions, which are performed without any malice or duplicity, reveal the intricate and extensive acculturation process both children undergo as women growing up in urban Nigeria. She naively attempts to mimic Sheri who in turn mimics the contemporary images of beauty she witnesses in the media. While Sheri’s outfit and makeup may indicate her rebellion against her religious and cultural traditions they

also, however, reveal her absorption of a particular form of 'Western' dress, one that is centred on the sexualisation and commercialisation of the female body. The idealised version of beauty that Sheri apes is epitomised in the slender female figure perpetuated as the norm within a globalised consumerist culture. According to feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo, these idealised images of beauty are insidious precisely because they appear so normative:

Images of slenderness are never "just pictures," as the fashion magazines continually maintain (disingenuously) in their own defense. Not only are the artfully arranged bodies in the ads and videos and fashion spreads powerful lessons in how to see and (evaluate) bodies, but also they offer fantasies of safety, self-containment, acceptance, immunity from pain and hurt. They speak to young people not just about how to be beautiful but about how to become what the dominant culture admires, how to be cool, how to "get it together." (Bordo xxi-xxii)

Sheri gives the illusion of being sophisticated and worldly: an identity she maintains well into their teenage years. Her carefree attitude and playful flirtatiousness which seemed endearing when she was younger, however, is misconstrued as coquettishness by adults and her teenage peers. Describing the content of the letters they exchanged while attending high school in different boarding institutions, Enitan comments that "Sheri was always in trouble. Someone called her loose, someone punished her. Someone tried to beat her up. It was always girls. She seemed to get along with boys" (Atta 51). On the one hand, Sheri is considered attractive because of her mixed race heritage but on the other, she is castigated for not conforming to the stereotype of a demure and submissive African woman. But her transgressions are not easily forgiven. Sheri is gang raped at a party by three teenage boys who use violence to police the rigid social boundaries that Sheri appears to violate. As focaliser and narrator, Enitan details the events that lead to the assault.

During a school holiday, Sheri convinces Enitan to attend a party in the local park organised by Doula, a boy whom Enitan is interested in romantically, without either of their parents' knowledge or consent. Once they arrive at the party, Sheri begins dancing and sharing the alcohol laced punch with Doula and his friends. While Enitan may be the more socially awkward of the two girls, her silence and reserved demeanour provide her with the

necessary physical and emotional distance to begin to resist the racial and patriarchal systems that define Sheri in eroticised terms. Enitan observes Sheri's interactions with the boys and instinctively problematizes the gender relations between them:

I watched her play wrestle with the portly boy after their dance. He grabbed her waist and the other two laughed as she struggled. If she preferred boys, she was free to. She would eventually learn. It was obvious, these days, that most of them preferred girls like Sheri. Whenever I noticed this, it bothered me. I was sure it would bother me even if I was on the receiving end of such admiration. Who were they to judge us by skin shades? (Atta 60)

This seemingly innocent flirtatious behaviour conveys a far more disquieting reality and is a foreshadowing of the violent attack that Sheri experiences at the hands of the three boys. As

Bordo further explains:

Frequently, even when women are silent (or verbalizing exactly the opposite), their bodies are seen as "speaking" a language of provocation. When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, "flaunting" [...] When these inviting female bodies are inaccessible or unresponsive to male overtures, this may be interpreted as teasing, taunting, and mocking. (6)

Drunk and high on marijuana, the three boys rape Sheri at the back of a van. Defining sexual assault, Jan Jordan posits: "the act of rape involves not only the physical violation of another's body, but an attempt to secure total control and dominance. What many rapists are seeking is a sense of their own power, their ability to subordinate another to their will"

(Jordan 6). The overt misogyny that the boys display is inculcated through patriarchal codes of dominance that teach young boys like Doula to embrace an ethos of male superiority.

The experience deeply scars both Sheri and Enitan, who witnesses the assault. Enitan walks to the van to find the boys have pinned Sheri down and have covered her mouth so she is completely immobilised: "It was a silent moment; a peaceful moment. A funny moment, too. I didn't know why, except my mouth stretched into the semblance of a laugh before my hands came up and tears filled my eyes" (Atta 63). Enitan uses "grain to clean" the semen and blood off Sheri and then walks her back home (63). She gives Sheri a bath, attempting to wash the physical evidence of the rape away but cannot get rid of the psychological scars it

leaves behind. The incident merits quoting at length as it illustrates the traumatic impact of the rape:

She looked tiny. Tiny. There were red dots at the top of her back, pale lines along her lower back where fingers had tugged her skin. She hugged herself as I ran warm water into a bucket. I helped her into my bathtub. I began to wash her back, then I poured a bowl of water over her. She winced. "Too hot?" I asked. "Cold," she said. The water felt warm. I added hot water. The hot water trickled out reluctantly. "My hair," she said. I washed it with bathing soap. Her hair was tangled, but it turned curly and settled on her cheeks. I washed her arms, then her legs. The water dribbling down the drain, I wanted it to be clear. Once it was clear, we would have survived. Instead it remained pink and grainy, with hair strands and soap suds. The sand grains settled and the scum stayed. (63-64)

Sheri and Enitan are no longer simply bonded by a shared friendship but also by the violence of the sexual assault. The scene mirrors that of the two girls having a frank conversation about their sexuality in the confines of Sheri's bedroom when they first meet. Atta captures the uninhibited voice of the child as Sheri explains the intricacies of sex to her new "best friend" (16). "Banana into tomato. Don't you know about it? My grandma told me" (32). Seated on Sheri's bed, away from her mother, Enitan is able to ask the questions she is too afraid or reluctant to ask her own mother: "When you... I mean, with your husband. Where does it go? Because I don't..." (32). She fumbles with her words and cannot enunciate her thoughts in part because she is embarrassed by the subject matter but also because she has imbibed a code of shame and silence. Enitan is alienated from her own body and as Smite argues "at age eleven, certain parts of the female anatomy are still foreign to her, as the result of sexual estrangement due to pedagogical approaches that render sexuality taboo" (Smite xx). But despite her bravado, Sheri's simplistic understanding of sex also displays her own naivety. As a literary device, their childish and often comic banter, however, allows Atta to broach the subject in a manner that not only disarms her reader but interrogates the gendering process of the female subject. Sheri's knowledge though flawed is gained through a complex process of the acculturation that incorporates information from her grandmother and the community of women around her as well as the media and her peers.

After the rape, this image of childhood as one of innocence and freedom is shattered as the intimacy of the bathroom space is transformed into a site of mourning. As in *Purple Hibiscus*, Atta places emphasis on the body's ability to speak the unspeakable. The marks on Sheri's skin and the red dots on her back illustrate the brutality of the boys' attack. Enitan's repetition of the word "tiny" in her description of Sheri, seated in the bath, also highlights her friend's vulnerability and the dehumanisation she undergoes at the hands of Doula and his friends. Reminiscent of a religious baptismal ritual, Enitan washes her friend's body but the experience does not result in a transcendent moment of transformation from one heightened form of being to another. Instead, Enitan and Sheri are baptised into a more earthly reality, one that is marked by pain and struggle. Similarly, like the scum that clings to the bath, the memory of the assault cannot be so easily washed away. Atta also places the body, specifically the female 'African' body, at the very heart of the novel's thematic concerns. As feminist philosopher, Iris Marion Young posits:

Each person experiences aspects of gender structures as facticity, as sociohistorical givens with which she or he must deal. Every person faces the question of what to wear, for example, and clothing options and conventions derive from multiple structures of profit seeking, class and occupational distinction, income distribution, heterosexual normativity, and spaces and expectations of occasions and activities and the possibilities of conformity and transgression they bring. However limited the choices or the resources to enact them, each person takes up the constrained possibilities that gender structures offer in their own way, forming their own habits as variations on those possibilities, or actively trying to resist or refigure them. (Young, 25-26)

Thus according to Young, gender is always "lived through individual bodies [...] not as a set of attributes that individuals have in common" (26).

Atta's novel, however, does not simply require sympathy for Sheri and Enitan and condemnation for Doula and his friends. The rape is related within a much larger narrative of normalised systemic violence. Atta further demystifies the ideology of violence as rooted in poverty or among disenfranchised communities by creating a scenario where the attack takes place in the 'safety' of a public park in an affluent neighbourhood in Lagos. The boys are not strangers to Sheri and Enitan either. Enitan has previously interacted with Doula at school

functions and both appear to have similar social circles. Bordo offers a comparable perspective, arguing:

The reality is, however, that young girls are much more likely to be raped by friends and family members than by strangers and that very few men, whether strangers or acquaintances, are unaffected by having a visual culture of nymphets prancing before their eyes, exuding a sexual knowledge and experience that preteens don't really have. (Bordo xxx)

Bordo does not, however, imply that perpetrators of rape and violence are merely victims of a hyper-sexualised media environment rather than the system itself sanctions the objectification of women and young girls creating a culture of impunity. The two girls' relationship is thus dramatically altered as they relate to each other through a veil of silence, mistrust and shame.

Unable to process or understand the assault in any other terms, Enitan denounces Sheri for the assault:

Yes. I blamed her. If she hadn't smoked it would never have happened. If she hadn't stayed as she did at the party, it would certainly not have happened. Bad girls got raped. We all knew. Loose girls, forward girls, raw, advanced girls. Laughing with boys. Following them around, thinking she was one of them. Now, I could smell their semen on her, and it was making me sick. It was her fault. (65)

Trauma theorist Cathy Carat's astute question, "Is trauma the encounter with death or the ongoing experience of surviving it?" (Carat in Murphy55) is thus highlighted by Enitan and Sheri's incapacity to excise the rape from their psyches. During their last encounter as children, Enitan notes that Sheri has begun consuming junk food voraciously: bringing with her "biscuits, coconut candy and doughnuts" to each of her visits (65). She wonders how Sheri could eat so much while she hasn't been able to eat since the assault. Enitan confesses that she has difficulty breathing and has nightmares where "fishermen break into her room" and Sheri "with her face made up like a masquerade" slams into her arms and she falls out of bed crying (Atta 65). While they are in Enitan's room, Sheri eats a whole series of doughnuts which then cause her to retch. In a scene reminiscent of the moment Enitan washes Sheri after the rape, Enitan is compelled to clean the vomit which falls on her face and on the floor.

Enitan's anger and resentment are a further indication of the sense of helplessness and fear

that she feels. She misunderstands Sheri's new eating habits and does not recognise the symptoms of trauma Sheri is manifesting. Trauma, according to theorist Kali Tal "is enacted in a liminal state, outside of the bounds of 'normal' human experience and the subject is radically ungrounded" (Tal 15). For Atta, however, violent attacks such as the rape depicted in the novel, occur within the bounds of the 'normal' in a society where girls like Sheri and Enitan are expected to abide by patriarchal and class strictures that do not accord them the same freedoms as their male peers. In a later edition of her 1996 study *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Tal offers a revised definition of trauma noting that the "definition of trauma no longer includes the claim that a traumatic event is one that lies outside the realm of 'normal human experience.'" (3). Quoting feminist clinician Laura Brown, Tal highlights the normative nature of trauma particularly "for members of oppressed and disadvantaged groups" (Tal 3). Her definition is particularly useful for understanding Atta's female characters. Sheri's new food fetish, as Bordo illustrates in her discussion of eating disorders like anorexia nervosa, is an attempt to disavow her femaleness:

Anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the "femaleness" of the body and a punishment of its desires. Those desires have frequently been culturally represented through the metaphor of female appetite. The extremes to which the anorexic takes the denial of appetite (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends body totally, becoming pure "male" will, or she capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its distinguishing hungers. She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground. (Bordo 8)

Extending Bordon's argument, I would argue, Sheri gorges herself in a bid to disguise her slender body and to distance herself from the images of femininity and sexuality to which she had previously ascribed. Subconsciously assuming responsibility for the rape, Sheri also utilises food as a source of comfort and a more socially accepted escape mechanism from the trauma she has experienced. In this regard, Sheri and Enitan embody multiple, often contradictory, cultural identities. They both ascribe to idealised versions of both 'Western' and 'African' forms of beauty. For instance, before the rape, Enitan protests that she wanted

to be “fatter, with a pretty face, and she wanted boys to like her. Girls overseas could starve themselves on leaves and salad oil if they wanted. In our country, women were hailed for having huge buttocks” (46). As an adult Enitan expresses similar sentiments about Sheri’s stepmothers:

Perceptions of beauty had changed over the years, between satellite and cable television and overseas travel but not for women like these. They wanted to be fat, they enjoyed being fat and worried about foreign women who cried on television because they were fat. (246)

Thus, in her father’s polygamous family, Sheri’s sudden love for food is not viewed as a symptom of a psychological wound. It is regarded, rather, as a sign of a healthy sense of self. The female body in this case is linked with fertility and motherhood which means Sheri is not subjected to scrutiny and her eating disorder is not perceived as such. Still, her actions are a salient critique of the cultural discourse that places value on the woman’s capacity to bear children. The acceptance of Sheri’s new eating habits also means that the silence around the rape is maintained highlighting the various systems in place that ensure that gendered violence remains unquestioned.

The truth is only revealed after Sheri discovers that she is pregnant and attempts a self-induced abortion using a metal clothes hanger. Sheri has just enough knowledge about reproduction and sexuality to know that she can terminate the pregnancy but there aren’t enough support structures so that the young girl can seek medical assistance. Cultural and religious taboos around pre-marital sex and single parenthood also mean that Sheri is hesitant to speak to either her grandmother or stepmothers about the rape or the pregnancy. Again, Atta shifts focus back on to childhood as a site of innocence that is disrupted by the realities of the adult world.

The varied reactions of the adults in the two children’s lives, once the events leading up to Sheri’s abortion are revealed, further illustrate the conflicting and differing gendered perspectives that the two girls’ are raised with. For instance, Sheri’s grandmother, Ahuja, a

woman of considerable influence and power within their community, takes her own punitive actions against the boys who rape her granddaughter. With a “mob in tow,” they march to each of the boys’ homes breaking down “doors and windows” as well as “furniture” (58). Ahuja grabs hold of the boys’ crotches and forces each of their family members to apologise to Sheri while laying “flat on the floor” (158). Ahuja’s vigilante justice serves as a critique of Nigeria’s ineffectual justice system which does not provide the necessary means by which Sheri can seek help. It also becomes a catalyst for Sheri’s recovery; although perhaps the word ‘recovery’ is not entirely accurate. Neither Sheri nor Enitan truly ‘recover’ from the assault but for Sheri, Ahuja’s actions and the public acknowledgement of the injustice allows her to begin rebuilding her life in the very same community that the assault occurs.

Sheri’s grandmother occupies a revered social position as the matriarch of the family. ‘Ahuja’ is the title given to a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca, Islam’s revered holy city. Widowed in her thirties, Ahuja also “headed a market women’s association and earned enough to educate her children overseas” (Atta 158). She raises Sheri as her own daughter after her father returns home from England bringing Sheri with him. She protects her from any potential mistreatment from Chief Baker’s other wives who are said to “worry more about Ahuja’s rage than about their husband’s” (158). Her son may be the perceived head of the family but it is Ahuja who resolves disputes and keeps the peace in the family. Through women like Ahuja, Atta emphasises the possibilities for female agency and autonomy even within a restrictive patriarchal framework. As an adult, Sheri therefore adopts her grandmother’s values and independence. Enitan describes Sheri as “her grandmother’s true daughter” capable of both acceding to and rebelling against the cultural norms that constrain them. Nevertheless, despite Ahuja’s influence and authority, there is little systemic change that occurs in the course of Atta’s novel.

Female Doppelgangers: Patriarchy, Religion and the Contemporary Nigerian Woman

In depicting Sheri and Enitan's lives, Atta figures both women as literary doubles or doppelgangers. Sheri and Enitan, as Karen Jorgensen contends in her discussion of the doppelganger:

Serve as foils to each other, reflecting and elucidating the personality differences of the characters in the novel, but perhaps even more significantly, this literary technique of doubling also exposes correlations between characters where none would ordinarily be apparent. (Jorgensen 20)

While the two girls lose touch with each other after the assault, they rekindle their friendship when Enitan returns from university in Britain. Enitan's parents send her to a boarding school after Sheri's attempted abortion not only to steer her away from Sheri but also as Enitan states, it was the "fashion in the seventies" (73). Middle-class parents send their children to schools in Europe because of the prestige a 'Western' education offers. But for Enitan, the life abroad also provides enough physical and psychological distance away from her parents and country so she can begin to alter some of the beliefs and value systems with which she is raised. Through a conversation with a friend at school, for instance, she is able to understand that Sheri was not to blame for the rape. Robin is the first person who tells Enitan that "nothing a woman does justifies rape" whereas she had previously believed that "some girls encourage it" and that only "bad girls got raped" (74). Enitan's beliefs are engendered in a culture that fosters what Clay-Warner and Odem refer to as "rape myths" or "commonly held assumptions about rape that are untrue" (Clay-Warner and Odem xvi). They cite other examples of rape myths which include: "the belief that women secretly want to be raped, or that a woman can stop a rape if she really wants to" (xvi). Enitan's transition from teenager to adult is thus not only influenced by her upbringing at home but also by the relationships she develops in Britain. In the nine years, she resides in London she undergoes several transformative experiences. Her anecdotes concerning the racism she experiences echo Adichie's own experience in America as detailed in the introductory chapter:

My new school friends were surprised that I didn't live in a hut in Africa, that I'd never seen a lion except in a London zoo. Some confessed that their parents didn't like black people. Only one had decided that she didn't either, and I ignore her, the way I ignored another who said "hey man" and did all sorts of silly dances whenever she saw me. (73-74)

The alienation Enitan feels creates a sense of nostalgia for Nigeria that eventually compels her to return home at the conclusion of her university studies. Nostalgia forms an integral part of all three authors 'writing back to Africa' project. According to Linda Hutcheon nostalgia, however, often becomes:

'Memorialized' as past, crystallized into precious moments selected by memory, but also by forgetting, and by desire's distortions and reorganizations. Simultaneously distancing and approximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present—which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. (Hutcheon 3)

But for Atta, Adichie and Unigwe, nostalgia is not a simplistic over-sentimentalisation of the past, instead it provides them with a catalyst through which to examine and interrogate life in both Europe and Africa. Atta, for instance, utilises Enitan's sense of 'foreignness' in England and desire for home to critically comment on and destabilise notions of 'Western' modernity and progress in much the same way that Unigwe does with Belgium. Furthermore, Enitan's experiences of racism become more intractable in the context of her professional environment at the law firm where she begins working after university. While she was able to defy the other children at school who laughed at and teased her, she feels less empowered when "the partner at her law firm stares at her braided hair as if it were a head full of serpents" (78). The implications of her statement are, of course, that her professional career would be hampered because of the racial stereotypes held by her bosses at the firm. The prestige associated with sending one's children to Europe to build a better life for themselves is thus revealed to illusory. I will, however, discuss in greater detail the implications of the three authors'

engagement with ideas of diaspora in the following chapter the focus of which is Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*.

Enitan's longing for a "warmer," more welcoming country is, however, also informed by her failed romantic relationships in London. Her first boyfriend accuses her of "frigidity" while the second is unfaithful from the onset of their relationship (73). What is evident at the outset of each dalliance is that Enitan still bears deep psychological wounds because of Sheri's assault. Speaking about her relationship with her first boyfriend, Enitan remarks: "each time I opened my mouth to tell him, about Sheri and me and that awful summer, I thought my voice would blast my ribs apart, flatten him, flatten the bed, toss my sheets around like the wind, so I said nothing" (73). Enitan's silence is only broken once she and Sheri become confidants again. A chance meeting between the two not only helps to propel the novel's plot forward but also re-introduces Sheri to the reader. It is the early 1980s and Enitan is required to attend compulsory military training after graduating from law school. As she returns to the barracks from a run one day, she bumps into Sheri who is driving a "new Peugeot" (95). The camaraderie between them remains as it was when they were children. Both women respond to each other with the same candour and affection:

"Sheri Bakare," I said. It was like finding a pressed flower I'd long forgotten about. Her smile was less broad; her pink gums seemed to have disappeared. "Aburo," she said. "Is this your face?" [...]. We were holding hands. She was wearing a yellow *agbada* with gold embroidery around the neckline, and her fingers were laden with gold rings.

While Enitan has chosen a professional career path, Sheri becomes "part of the Sugar daddy circuit in Lagos" (76), women who support themselves by developing relationships with middle-aged married men. Sheri's life was radically altered following the death of both her grandmother and her father, Chief Bakare, soon after Enitan leaves for Britain. In this first encounter as adults Sheri confesses that she too would have wanted to travel and study abroad like Enitan but her father's death prevents her from doing so. As the oldest male relative, her uncle forcefully inherits most of Chief Bakare's wealth and property, leaving few

options for Sheri to fend for herself and for her larger extended family. Sheri, however, does not view her liaisons with married men in the same terms Enitan does. Born into a Muslim family, polygamy is accepted as a religious and cultural practice and therefore does not carry the same social stigma for Sheri as it does for Enitan who was raised by a deeply religious Christian mother and an agnostic father. A few weeks after their chance meeting, Enitan visits Sheri's apartment which is paid for by her current 'sugar daddy,' a powerful military official, Brigadier Ibrahim Hassan, who is also polygamous with two other wives. In the personal confines of Sheri's apartment, the two women are finally able to have a candid conversation about the rape. But it is Sheri who brings up the topic refusing to image herself as a victim: "You can say it. I did not rape them: they raped me, and if they see me they'd better cross the road" (102). Sheri's refusal to accept culpability for the rape accords her much more freedom than Enitan who, until this point, has been unable to vocalise her experience. Atta is able to illustrate the complex nature of rape, sexual assault and trauma by expanding the understanding of definition of victim and survivor. Enitan may not have been physically assaulted but the traumatic effects of the rape continue to affect her adult relationships and choices.

Sheri's social positioning, however, also means that despite her difficult 'recovery,' she cannot avail herself of the same social status accorded to mothers and married women in an African feminist sense. Her own capacity to envision her life apart from the assault is curtailed by the stigma of being identified as a rape victim. Commenting on the reality of living as a woman in Nigerian society, Enitan makes the following assertion:

Better to be ugly, to be crippled, to be a thief even than to be barren [...] A woman may be forgiven for having a child out of wedlock if she had no hope of getting married and she would be dissuaded if she didn't have a degree. Marriage could immediately wipe out a slutish past, but angel or not, a woman had to have a child. (102)

Sheri is considered 'damaged' not simply because of the rape but because of the barrenness that results from her attempted abortion. She confesses to Enitan: "which single man from a

normal family would have a person like me?” (102). In all three novels in this project, the women characters are compelled to depend on men for their financial and material security, further entrenching their marginalised positions. But unlike *Purple Hibiscus*, in which Beatrice remains in an abusive relationship for the bulk of Adichie’s novel and resorts to murder to free herself from her husband, *Everything Good Will Come* focuses instead on the often non-violent though sometimes contradictory strategies women like Sheri and Enitan adopt to subvert patriarchal dominance. Both women emerge at the conclusion of the novel independent of masculine control as they each learn how to manipulate the systems in which they reside in order to gain some autonomy. The more pragmatic of the two, Sheri chastises Enitan for what she regards as her friend’s idealistic ‘Western’ feminist views. Enitan’s advice for Sheri to leave Brigadier Ibrahim is met with cynicism: “You’ve been away too long. You’ve become a butter-eater” (Atta 104). Sheri’s reference to food brings the conversation round to the centrality of the body yet again. To become a “butter-eater” is thus a metaphor for Enitan’s cultural alienation; unable to stomach the spices and chillies that are a staple in indigenous Nigerian meals. According to Sheri, Enitan no longer understands the social dynamics of life in Nigeria. Sheri functions within the strictures of her society but nevertheless applies her own code of ethics. As Ibrahim’s mistress, for instance, she will spend hours cooking for him but declines to marry him even after overtures from his other wives. Sheri further asserts: “where I differ with most women is, if you lift your hand to beat me, I will kill you” (104). Like Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*, Sheri is compelled to defend herself using whatever weapons are at her disposal when the Brigadier hits her for the first time. But where Beatrice is unable to react with physical violence Sheri, who is raised on the streets of Lagos by her grandmother, is unafraid to confront the Brigadier. Sheri fights back and beats him with a “pot of okra stew” (170). The consequences of which are that she loses the financial security that he provides.

In contrast to Enitan, Sheri thus accepts the seemingly uncompromising nature of the gender roles she is compelled to adopt but, nevertheless, attempts to construct a less restrictive space for herself. Despite Sheri's strength and bravado, however, she remains relegated to the domestic sphere. Her 'usefulness' is determined by how well she can manage her home with the Brigadier. As Young contends: "gendered hierarchies of power intersect with a sexual division of labor and normative heterosexuality in many ways to reproduce a sense of entitlement of men to women's service and an association of heterosexual masculinity with force and command," (Young 24). I would thus argue that polygamy, as practiced by the Brigadier and Sheri's father, sanctions a system in which men are 'entitled' to women's labour and service but are not expected to take any form of responsibility. Patriarchy also accords Sheri's father all authority over the family's wealth and resources but he does not participate in the running of the home. Thus Sheri may have amicable relationships with her step-mothers and siblings but she and Chief Bakare barely speak to one another as the older narrating Enitan notes of Sheri's father: "the man didn't bother to raise Sheri. He handed her over to his mother and then to his wives" (171). Sheri's life is defined as much by the presence of her mothers as by the absence of her father who is only ever mentioned in passing. As a child, Sheri seems oblivious to the power dynamics in her father's home but as a more self-aware adult she comments wryly: "look at the way we were raised two women in one house, one man. Mama Kudi's turn to cook for Daddy. Mama Gani's turn to sleep with Daddy. A young girl shouldn't grow up seeing such things. But that is my family. I've accepted it" (306). Nelly Furman argues:

Whether one views marriage as the blissful coming together of equal voices speaking in unison or, as the site of an ongoing dialogue between individuals continuously affirming their differences, we cannot escape the structure it imposes, the patriarchal society it sustains. (Furman 76).

Enitan's parents' marriage exemplifies this assertion. While Enitan's father appears to respect and love his daughter, he treats his wife with contempt and little affection. Arin's

attempts at manipulating and controlling spaces like the jetty are therefore not merely the actions of a disgruntled spouse and parent but they reflect the latent inequalities in the home which are also reflected in the larger society. For instance, Arin quits her professional career as a “chartered secretary” (Atta 22) to become a housewife after she marries her husband. She is recognised as her home’s matriarch but her role is undermined by the fact that she remains financially dependent on Sunny. Even after the two get divorced, he retains financial control over Arin, refusing to sign over deeds of property that would ensure she owns assets that would give her an income each month. Thus, while Sunny encourages Enitan to actively defy stereotypes, he maintains autocratic patriarchal codes with regard to his wife. He is also accorded far more respect than Arin because of his role as a husband and father as well as his high social standing as a lawyer.

Although Arin does not undergo the same level of abuse that Beatrice does in *Purple Hibiscus*, she nevertheless feels betrayed and neglected. During their marriage, Sunny not only distances himself from her but has an affair and fathers a child after their own son dies. Enitan’s eleven-year-old experiencing self-reveals the tragedy of her brother’s death at the commencement of the narrative:

I was their first child, their only child now, since my brother died. He lived his life between sickle cell crises. My mother joined a church to cure him, renounced Anglicanism and herself it seemed, because one day, my brother had another crisis and she took him there for healing. He died three years old. I was five (10).

This description is, however, not followed by a lengthy exposition on the nature of her brother’s illness. Instead, Enitan shifts focus from her brother to her mother’s association with a religious sect which epitomises Arin’s struggles to find acceptance and a sense of belonging. While Sunny is able to extricate himself from the distressing domestic atmosphere of a sick child at home, his wife’s options remain limited. As a much more intuitive and insightful adult, Enitan makes the following comments regarding her mother’s choices:

Had she turned to wine or beer, people would have called her a drunkard. Had she sought out men, they would have called her a slut. But to turn to God? Who would quarrel with her? Leave her alone, they would say. She is religious. (179-181)

Thus Arin's religious beliefs are also an act of rebellion against rigid societal norms that compel her to continue playing the part of the submissive wife despite her grief at the death of her son. She embraces a church which offers a syncretic fusion of Pentecostal Christianity and local animist beliefs while imposing strict ascetic standards on its followers. It emphasises, as Ruth Marshall-Fratani points out, a "doctrine of 'holiness' and anti-materialism, expressed in the eschewal of fancy clothes, expensive commodities, modern media such as television and [is] peopled by relatively disadvantaged social groups" (Marshall-Fratani 282). The church is thus a freeing and restricting space for Arin who appears to adopt its beliefs wholeheartedly. For Arin, as for the other followers, the sect allows a re-imagining of the self within the confines of the homogenous cultural milieu. Regular meetings at the church along with the total devotion demanded by the sect mean she is able to construct a life for herself away from her troubled marriage. With "no real distinction to be made between the natural and the supernatural" (Marshall-Fratani 288), the church also provides her with a culturally acceptable narrative from which to mourn her son's passing. The priest suggests her son is a returning spirit known in the Yoruba worldview as 'Abiku.' Capricious and sly, Abiku are said to be able to traverse natural and supernatural "worlds, places, spaces and times" (Ouma in *Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction* 240). The word 'Abiku' literally means "born to die" in Yoruba (Ilechukwu 242). Thus Abiku occupy a liminal space between life and death. Similarly, the Igbo from Nigeria's South also believe in child spirits called 'Ogbanje.' According to Sunday Illechikwu, the term 'Ogbanje' is:

Commonly used to describe a child or adolescent that is said to repeatedly die and be repeatedly born by the same mother. The child is said to die before the next one is born in serial sequence. Ogbanje may also be used to refer to a living child, adolescent, or adult who was preceded in birth order by a child or children that died early in life and is thought to have this potential to "come and go". This is a malignant form of reincarnation. The Igbo believe that an ogbanje has ties with deities or agents of deities who are said to guard the interface

between birth and a postulated pre-birth state and who are believed to mediate life processes. (239-240).

Arin's son's death and illness are therefore attributed to "the wrong sort of spiritual-moral order," which can only be averted and rectified with the appropriate rites and rituals (228). The priest further suggests Enitan may also be Abiku and in need of a cleansing ceremony to protect her from an early death like her brother. Arin believes the cleansing will not only be useful in her own psychic healing but will tether Enitan's wandering spirit to the earth, breaking the "eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth" (Lim 63) and, in doing so, repair the damaged relationship between mother and daughter. Away from the perceived influence of Enitan's agnostic father, Arin places tremendous hope in the church's ability to heal the growing rift between herself and her daughter. Enitan is, however, reluctant to embrace the sect. Though rendered comic through the child's perspective, she makes astute observations of the sect and its religious leader:

He had a bump on his forehead, an expression as if he was smelling something bad. He pronounced his visions between chants that sounded like the Yoruba words for butterfat, dung beetle, and turkey: *labalaba, yimiyimi, tolotolo*. He smelled of incense. The day he stood before me I kept my eyes on the hem of his cassock. I was a reborn spirit, he said, like my brother, and my mother would have to bring me for cleansing. I was too young, she said. My time would soon come, he said. Turkey, turkey, turkey. (10-11)

Enitan's somewhat irreverent description of the priest reveals the constructed and performative nature of the ritual. In the context of the narrative, the ritual is not rendered harmless or simply as a cathartic aspect of the sect's religious practices, rather Atta utilises Enitan's views to critically comment on the more disruptive aspects of the sect's rituals and, by extension, of religion in the lives of women like Arin. The rituals and practices take on a far more troubling characteristic when rendered through young Enitan's eyes. The church not only dictates how its followers should behave but the patriarchal thrust of its beliefs means the rules apply primarily to women. For Arin, it may provide a sense of order amidst the chaos of her personal life, but it also creates a seemingly impenetrable emotional and psychological distance between herself and her daughter. Arin remains aloof for much of Enitan's life, a situation the young Enitan captures succinctly in the following quotation:

My mother never had a conversation with me; she talked and knew I was listening. I always was. The mere sound of her footsteps made me breathe faster. She hardly raised a hand to me, unlike most mothers who beat their children with tree branches, but she didn't have to. I'd been caned before, for daydreaming in class, with a side of a ruler, on my knuckles, and wondered if it wasn't an easier punishment than having my mother look at me as if she'd caught me playing with my own poop. Her looks were hard to forget. At least caning welts eventually disappeared. Holy people had to be unhappy or strict, or a mixture of both, I'd decided. (Atta 19)

Their relationship is thus characterised by anxiety, fear and mistrust. Arin cannot conceive of a different mode of being and in doing so, socialises her daughter into a life of gendered shame and guilt. This shame is exemplified in moments such as the incident where a young Enitan describes a particularly difficult and awkward conversation with her mother. Arin attempts to explain Enitan's emerging puberty. Arin describes menstruation as "unclean" and sex as a "filthy act" both of which are nothing more than a necessary process in procreation; as Arin further asserts "all women want children" (23). She assures her young daughter: "I have prayed for you and nothing bad will come your way" (24). In a first reference to the novel's title, *Everything Good Will Come*, Arin offers what becomes a refrain across the narrative spoken by various female characters. Uttered in the negative, Arin's "nothing bad will come your way" is contrasted with the more affirmative and optimistic, "everything good will come" which concludes the novel. Arin's prayer, however, cannot avert the grief and pain she herself experiences nor does it protect her daughter.

Politics, Gender and the Banality of Violence

Unlike her mother, Enitan rejects religion and is more overtly defiant of patriarchal norms. Even when she gets married to her first husband Niyi, she is unwilling to play the part of the docile, submissive wife like the other women around her. Observing her mother-in-law, Enitan comments:

Toro Franco. She was one of those women who swallowed her voice from the day she married. She was a nurse, and yet her husband and sons, all lawyers, thought she couldn't grasp the rudiments of Offer and Acceptance, so she acted like she didn't. She called "precedence" "presidents," walked around with her underskirt hanging out. [...] If they

mentioned the word hungry, she ran into her kitchen and began to boss her house boys around. (Atta 182)

Enitan's perspectives as an adult may be accurate but her relationship with Toro Franco cannot grow or develop because of her inability to view her mother-in-law as anything more than a victim. I posit that this is also largely because the adult Enitan is a lot less compassionate than her younger self. Her strident and polemical tone means she is unable to empathise with the women around her. This is further evidenced in Enitan's relationship with Sheri. Despite their close friendship Enitan describes Sheri in terms that are reductive and even a little disparaging:

I was glad I was not pretty. Prettiness could encourage people to treat a woman like a doll, to be played with, tossed around, fingered, dismembered and discarded. Prettiness could also make a woman lazy if she were congratulated for it too often and remunerated too long. Sheri was the Nigerian man's ideal: pretty, shapely, yellow to boot with some regard to woman's station. Now she was a kitchen martyr, and may well have forgotten how to flaunt her mind. (105)

Enitan's adult voice thus often appears stilted and moralistic losing much of the vulnerability and spontaneity she had as a child. For instance, the intimacy of the relationship between Enitan and her father is conveyed with far more nuance as a child than when they are adults. Her candour whenever she speaks to him evokes a world which is rich in language and atmosphere:

He was sitting on my bed. Both feet were on it, and he still had his socks on. I sat on the floor by them. He rubbed my shoulder.
"Looking forward to going to school?"
"Yes"[...] "Anyone, who bullies you, beat them up," my father said.
I rolled my eyes. Who could I fight? [...] And another thing, these romance books you're reading. No chasing boys when you get there."
"I don't like boys."
"Good," he said. "Because you're not going there to study boy-ology."
"Daddy," I said. (39-40)

The episode of Sunny and Enitan chatting in her bedroom on the night before she leaves for boarding school for the first time provides a glimpse into the relationship between father and daughter. But the man described in this passage is imaged rather differently by the adult Enitan. Sunny is portrayed as a dictatorial employer who underpays his employees and is

miserly. When she commences her new job at his practice after her studies in the U.K., Enitan notes:

My father's office was designed like a classroom, without a blackboard. We sat behind desks, facing his room and whenever he came out, it was hard not to react as one might to a school master [...] I'd also discovered just how stingy he was. He had not increased lunch allowances for five years and I really wasn't surprised [...] My father always told me, he had no money [...] My father had scraped enough to acquire a large estate. If he worked these days, it was only because he wanted to. He had shed most of his staff now; except senior associates but still, he didn't pay well. (117-118)

On the one hand, Enitan's more critical perspective of her father is the result of her maturation and her growing awareness of his flaws. But on the other, in the context of the narrative, Atta also creates male characters who appear irredeemable. Sunny, for instance, cannot simply be a good father and husband, he is controlling and stereotypically unfaithful to his wife. Unlike Eugene in *Purple Hibiscus* who, despite his brutal abuse, does not appear as narrowly conceived of as Sunny and the other men in *Everything Good Will Come*. They are characterised with far less nuance which impedes a more complex reading of their humanity. Enitan's first boyfriend in Lagos, Mike, is an artist who is compassionate and emotionally accessible and intuitive but he too is incapable of sustaining a monogamous relationship. Niyi, her husband, whom she meets after the dissolution of her relationship with Mike, is so patriarchal that he consigns all domestic responsibilities to Enitan when they are married: "Niyi claimed he was totally inept inside kitchens. His favourite trick was to feign panic attacks by the door, clutching his throat and keeling over" (186). Niyi is also so insecure that he cannot conceive of a wife who defies him to pursue a course of action he disapproves of. He attempts to compel Enitan to abandon the political activism she adopts after her father is detained for defending Peter Mukoro, a newspaper columnist who is opposed to the new military government.

Despite Niyi's vehement protestations, Enitan joins a group of women who agitate for the release of political prisoners. Niyi's actions can be read as genuine concern for his

family's safety. His silence and anger at Enitan's choices can be viewed as the actions of a man whose wife faces possible violence and imprisonment under a dictatorial military regime. But Atta's narrative, focalised through Enitan, compels a much less sympathetic reading. At the conclusion of the novel, neither Enitan nor Niyi can reach a compromise. The result is the dissolution of their marriage. Enitan defines her marriage as a restrictive space and casts Niyi in an unfavourable light:

These days, I stretched. I spread my legs wide on my sofa, flung my arms wide over the back. I lay like an animal hide on my bed, face up and face down. Niyi was so tall, I'd always thought he deserved more space. The shrinkage I experienced was never worth it. (330)

Enitan's disdain for Mukoro also influences how the reader views him, which also colours the reader's perspective of Sunny's actions. Both men treat their wives deplorably and Mukoro is particularly chauvinistic towards women. Mukoro takes on a second wife without the consent of his first wife, to whom he has been married to for twenty-two years (138). Enitan describes Mukoro's behaviour when she first meets him at a party at her father's house:

Peter Mukoro tapped my arm. "I was calling that lady, that yellow lady in the kitchen but she ignored me. Tell her we need more rice. Please."
"Her name is Sheri."
"Yes." Tell her we need more rice. And beer. Wine is like water to me. I'm an African man." (12)

Thus, I would argue, while Atta's characterisation of women is compelling, I remain ambivalent about her depiction of the male characters in the novel. I would argue this one-dimensional perspective in some ways reduces the effectiveness of her critique of patriarchal systems as it does not allow for a more complex understanding of masculinity and its relation to patriarchy. Nevertheless, for Atta, women remain a pivotal force in the battle for both civic and gender freedoms. Enitan meets journalist Grace Ameh when her father is arrested. Ameh embodies what I would suggest is an idealised version of the African woman; one who is actively involved in both private and public spheres. As with Aunty Ifeomah in *Purple*

Hibiscus, Grace Ameh functions as a source of hope for the reader; offering a sense of balance and a future for the African woman. When Enitan asks Ameh what keeps her going and why she would “risk her life to tell a story.” Ameh responds: “You can’t kill a testimony of a country and of a people. That’s what we are fighting for, a chance to be heard. And the second thing is, I love my country” (299). Ameh appeals to a nationalism that Enitan remains wary of but nevertheless embraces and influences her decision to join Ameh’s protest group. Enitan believes “with the military in power, without a constitution, there was no other recourse besides protest, peaceful or violent” (300). But in a military dictatorship, Ameh’s life is constantly in danger. Her choice to agitate for political and gender freedom also means that she also faces a potentially brutal death at the hands of the regime. The women’s group protest eventually leads to Enitan’s father’s release but only marginally undermines the regime’s hold on power. At the conclusion of the novel, the political situation has not changed. Atta’s novel seems to suggest that while small victories in the political arena are in fact possible, the relationship between rulers and a country’s civilians is far more complex. As Mbembe argues:

Precisely because the postcolonial mode of domination is a regime that involves not just control but conviviality, even connivance – as shown by the constant compromises, the small tokens of fealty, people’s inherent cautiousness – the analyst must watch out for the myriad ways in which ordinary people guide, deceive and actually toy with power instead of confronting it directly. (Mbembe, “Provisional Notes on the Postcolony” 25)

The acceptance of violence as an everyday part of life is one of the ways Mbembe refers to. For instance, in relating his version of the Biafra war, Akanni, Enitan’s parents’ driver, deviates from the grand political narrative which cast the Biafrans as enemies of the Nigerian state. The young Enitan is fascinated by the stories of “Biafran soldiers stepping on land mines that blew up their legs like crushed tomatoes and Biafran children who ate lizard flesh to stay alive” (11). The horror of the war is vividly captured in the child’s rendering of Akanni’s stories. The government’s slogan: “To Keep Nigeria one is a task that must be

done” is also challenged as it is set against Enitan’s description of her father asking her “to hide under the bed” whenever there were bomb raid alerts” (10). Enitan appears oblivious to the potentially fatal threat of a bombing. But it is this childhood naivety that makes the war all the more disturbing. As an adult Enitan also highlights this banality of violence and the differing ways people find to subvert it. She describes how people react to the government’s announcement that they had yet another coup plot: “The government had warned people not to speculate about the coup. People began to joke in that senseless way that a beaten people might: ‘You’re speculating? Why are you speculating? You’ve been warned not to speculate. I’m not speculating with you’” (295). While Enitan might view Nigeria’s citizens as “beaten,” the victims of successive brutal military regimes and governments, Mbembe asserts:

Instead of keeping silent in the face of obvious official lies and the effrontery of elites, this body [referring to the ordinary civilian] breaks into laughter. And by laughing it drains officialdom of meaning and sometimes obliges it to function empty and powerless. (“Provisional Notes on the Postcolony” 25)

Still, *Everything Good Will Come* also highlights the very real consequences of the manipulation and abuse of power on a national scale. In a conversation with Grace, Enitan reacts angrily to the corruption and impunity she continues to witness in Nigeria:

“My husband says he can name five men in our country who can pay off the national debt, and a hundred companies overseas who earn a higher turnover than our oil revenues. I think that it will be better when the oil finally dries up. Maybe then we can have leaders who will get on with the business of running this country.”
“Maybe. But meanwhile their greed is our problem. Here and in the rest of Africa.”
Drought, famine, and disease. There was no greater disaster on our continent than the few who had control over our resources: oil, diamonds, human beings. They would sell anything and anyone to buyers overseas. (298)

Enitan is not only aware of the engendered inequalities within the Nigerian system but understands the intricate relationship between political and social exploitation and the commodification of both people and resources. Unigwe addresses these issues in her novel as well, grounding them in the global trade of African women sex workers.

For Atta, however, the presence of women who create dynamic lives for themselves in the contemporary Nigerian city remains the central focus of her novel. Similarly Nnodim contends:

The emergence of new urban identities and spaces and the integration of self, identity and society are explored from a gendered perspective: Sefi Atta's exploration of female subjectivities in urban Lagos further diversifies Nigerian novelistic imaginings of urban concerns and voices. (Nnodim 331)

Thus in an open ended conclusion that mirrors that of Adichie and Unigwe, Atta's novel does not embrace a utopian idealism that would see her characters arrive at lasting catharsis.

Rather, *Everything Good Will Come* suggests that one has to create what 'good' they can while remaining critical and attentive to the social, economic and political systems that govern their world.

CHAPTER THREE

The Botched Dream: Negotiating Shifting Diasporic Spaces in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*.

Before Efe came to Belgium, she imagined castles and clean streets and snow as white as salt. But now when she thinks of it, when she talks of where she lives in Antwerp, she describes it as a botched dream. (Chika Unigwe *On Black Sisters' Street* 24)

In Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* Efe is one of four female protagonists who are living and working in Antwerp, Belgium as sex workers. Efe, Sisi, Ama and Joyce have all migrated to Europe, driven from their homes by the desire for what they perceive as a 'better' life away from the harsh reality of existence in contemporary Nigeria. Speaking of Lagos, Nigeria's commercial centre, Sisi-, declares: "this place has no future" (18). She describes Lagos as "a city of death" (98). Each character faces tremendous difficulty eking out a living in the city where vast social and economic inequalities mean that even university educated people like Sisi struggle to find employment. In desperation the four women each accept offers to earn a living as sex workers, made to them by Dele—a notorious pimp who runs an international human trafficking and prostitution network.

As their final destination, Antwerp is "a longstanding node for the exchange of 'shining' commodities" (Ojwang 12). The Belgian city is one of the world's centres "of the global trade in diamonds – one of the most fetishistic of commodities, whose industrial uses are far outweighed by the object's exchange value" (12). The women's personal lives in *On Black Sisters' Street* are thus tied to a larger history. Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce join a global commodity culture that has developed over centuries. In my analysis of *On Black Sisters' Street*, I argue that the four women are portrayed both as objects of consumer desire and as desirers of consumer objects: driven by dreams of more elaborate and luxurious lifestyles than their own lived realities. Belgium, however, is not quite what they had imagined. In varying degrees they all experience an intense sense of isolation and feel alienated from each other and from the larger society as they are confronted with the reality of their new lives. Antwerp

is not the idyll they had envisioned: a European city with “clean streets” and “castles” (24). Even the slight elation Sisi feels when she first arrives; running her hands over the “soft” and “impossibly white sheets” in her room at the brothel is short lived (99). As part of her initiation, the proprietor, a woman known only as Madam, forces Sisi to turn her first trick in the toilets of a gloomy bar in the city’s red light district. The experience is traumatising, the more so because Sisi’s attempts at protest are futile:

Eyes shut still, she tried to wriggle out of his embrace. She did not want to do this anymore. ‘I don’t need this. Stop!’ she said. He held her close. Pushed her against the wall, his hands cupping her buttocks and buried his head in her breasts. ‘Stop.’ She shouted again. [...] His moans swallowed her voice. His penis searched for the gap between her legs. Finding warmth, he sighed, spluttered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus, inaugurating Sisi into her new profession. And she baptized herself into it with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth [...]. Her nose filled with the sudden stench of the room, and the stench filled her body and turned her stomach and she did not care whether or not she threw up. But she did not. (212-213)

This disquieting episode highlights the link between Sisi’s “status as a commodity and her status as an object for sexual exploitation” (Lutz 63). She cannot renege on the deal that she has made with Dele and is bound to him and Madam until she pays off the thirty thousand Euros that she owes him for her passage to Belgium. She is required to send him a minimum of five hundred Euros each month, an amount Dele promises she will be able to deliver: “as long as you dey ready to work hard, five hundred euro every month no go hard for you to pay” (42). Through vivid personal narratives such as this one, Unigwe explores the difficult and often taboo subjects of prostitution and human trafficking. She examines the complexities of migration, across geographic, political, cultural, gender, and economic frontiers, and how these complexities shape the diasporic lives of the women of *On Black Sisters’ Street*. My utilisation and understanding of the term ‘diaspora’ is guided by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza’s discussion of diasporic identities. In an article published in a collection of essays titled *The New African Diasporas*, Zeleza observes:

Diasporas are complex, social and cultural communities created out of real and imagined genealogies and geographies (cultural, racial, ethnic, national, continental, transnational) of belonging, displacement, and recreation, constructed and conceived at multiple temporal and

spatial scales, at different moments and distances from the putative home-land. A diaspora is fashioned as much in the fluid and messy contexts of social experience, differentiation, and struggle and through the trans-national circuits of exchange of diasporic resources and repertoires of power [...] (Zezeza 33)

Thus Sisi, Efe, Joyce and Ama's migration from Nigeria to Belgium can be understood as being part of global "trans-national circuits of exchange" that are constantly changing and evolving. This is further reflected in the multiple roles and identities the four women characters adopt both within Nigeria and as part of a greater African diasporic community in Belgium.

According to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, also known as the Palermo Protocol, human trafficking is defined as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. (qtd. in Olagbegi and Aminu et al.19)

The global trafficking in persons is "a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon involving multiple stakeholders at the institutional and commercial level. It is a demand-driven global business with a huge market for cheap labour and commercial sex" (Olagbegi and Aminu et al. 11). Without making any easy comparisons human trafficking today, as Daria Tunca asserts, "doubtlessly evokes the slave markets of the past" (Tunca "Redressing the 'Narrative Balance'" 9). An estimated twenty-eight million people are said to be living as modern-day slaves. Of that number, 1.2 million, mostly women and children are forced to work in the sex industry (Kara x). According to Nikolas D. Kristof and Cheryl Wudunn, "far more women and girls are shipped into brothels each year in the early twenty-first century than African slaves were shipped into slave plantations each year in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries – although of course the overall population was far smaller then" (13). Siddharth Kara, author

of the seminal study *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery*, further argues that sex trafficking is a direct result of growing global inequalities that manifest themselves in “deepening rural poverty, increased economic disenfranchisement of the poor, the net extraction of wealth and resources from poor economies into richer ones, and the broad-based erosion of real human freedoms across the developing world” (3-4). It is with these complexities in mind that I choose to utilise the term “irregular migrant” when referring to the women characters in *On Black Sisters’ Street*. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the term “migrant” refers to “persons, and family members, moving to another country or region to better their material or social conditions and improve the prospect for themselves or their family” (IOM para. 19). The IOM further defines an “irregular migrant” as a person who:

[...] owing to unauthorized entry, breach of a condition of entry, or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country. The definition covers inter alia those persons who have entered a transit or host country lawfully but have stayed for a longer period than authorized or subsequently taken up unauthorized employment (also called clandestine/undocumented migrant or migrant in an irregular situation). The term “irregular” is preferable to “illegal” because the latter carries a criminal connotation and is seen as denying migrants’ humanity. (IOM para.17)

In depicting the dynamics of modern-day human trafficking, *On Black Sisters’ Street* also calls attention to Belgium’s own colonial history. While the protagonists in Unigwe’s novel arrive from West Africa, their narrative nevertheless challenges what journalist and writer, Adam Hoschild, describes as “the great forgetting,” a term referring to the subordinate place that he asserts Belgium’s colonial history holds in the country’s cultural and political memory (293-295). *On Black Sisters’ Street* problematises notions of Belgian ‘prosperity’ and ‘progress’ particularly in light of the role played by Antwerp as a strategic slave port in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and as entry port for Belgium King Leopold’s plunder of the Congo in the nineteenth century where valuable exports such as rubber and ivory were largely extracted through a system of forced labour. With the help of a militia known as the

'Force Publique,' Belgian officials in the country often ordered the execution of villages or districts where people failed to supply the assigned "quota of rubber or fought back against the regime" (Hoschild 226). Millions starved or died from exhaustion after fleeing from their homes to avoid being conscripted either as ivory hunters, porters or rubber harvesters (226-230). Thousands of "women, children and the elderly died as hostages. Soldiers kept them in dirt compounds, often in chains, feeding them little or nothing until the men of a village brought in the demanded amount of rubber" (230).

Diseases like smallpox and sleeping sickness also decimated the population. Both new and old diseases spread rapidly because of the huge numbers of people travelling across long distances in search of raw materials. But perhaps the most iconic image of Leopold's rule is that of men and women with severed hands or feet – hacked off by soldiers as a punitive measure. The Belgian officials also expected local militia members to account for the number of bullets they used by cutting off an equivalent number of limbs. The limbs were an indication of how many people they had killed. Over half of the population of the Congo, about ten million people, died between 1880 and 1920. Belgium retained control of the Congo after Leopold's death in 1909, a year after he 'sold' the massive colony to the government, claiming that he did not have any money invested in the Congo and was not paid a salary as the colony's executive (259). Historian Jules Marchal, however, estimates that Leopold made about 1.1 billion US dollars in profits from the Congo, "not including some smaller or hard-to-trace sources of money" (Marchal qtd. in Hoschild 277). The Belgian government ruled the colony for fifty-one years. In 1960, the Democratic Republic of Congo gained independence, by which time American and British corporations had also invested in the African country's vast mineral wealth. Since then the Congo, "rich in copper, cobalt, diamonds, gold, tin, manganese and zinc," has been mired in conflict (301). The wars have involved not just the Congolese government and local militia but several African and

‘Western’ states as well as major global mining conglomerates; all of who are attempting to control the country and its resources. As Thomas Turner asserts:

Congo and neighbouring Zambia are drawing increased interest as the world’s appetite for minerals increases. Copper is sought after for use in power transmission and generation, building wiring, telecommunications and electrical and electronic products. Cobalt is used in super-alloys to make parts for gas turbine aircraft engines and demand is continuing to soar as it is used for rechargeable batteries in globally popular phones and devices. (47)

Thus while Belgium may no longer govern the Congo, its colonial legacy continues to be felt in the country. Hoschild observes, however, it is “an oversimplification to blame Africa’s troubles today entirely on European imperialism; history is far more complicated” (Hoschild 304).

This is a perspective with which Unigwe appears to concur in *On Black Sisters’ Street*. The novel illustrates that the participation of many women in the global sex trade is influenced by a myriad of social forces. It challenges stereotypical readings of its protagonists as mere victims forcefully captured and violently transported from one continent to the other. The women are portrayed both as subjects who exert their own agency and as individuals oppressed by “the pressures of society and the demands of its more powerful members” (Tunca “Redressing the ‘Narrative Balance’ 5). In accepting Dele’s proposal the women make individual decisions that indicate a measure of agency as they seek to take back control of their lives. Tunca further suggests that “the fact that three out of the four women [in Unigwe’s novel] deliberately chose to enter prostitution precludes any possibility of conveniently categorising them as innocent passive females crushed by the combined evils of African men and European mores” (4). Discussing the migratory experiences of Africans living in Europe, anthropologist, Laura Agustín expresses a similar perspective:

It’s wrong to maintain that for migrants, selling sex is inherently an experience of degradation. For some people selling sex is less stigmatising than other options, like being a drug mule [...]. Some who sell sex consider being a live-in maid more degrading, because it’s such hard work, with endless hours, no privacy, little time off and very, very low wages. Those are the three jobs widely available in the informal economy to women everywhere (Agustín in *This is Africa* 12).

I would assert, however, that for the four women in *On Black Sisters' Street*, the choices they make are perhaps not choices at all given the violence they have already endured and the fact that they are trapped within multiple discourses that continually define them as gendered sexualised objects. As Kara asserts: “knowledge and consent don’t negate the possibility of being trafficked and enslaved” (Kara “BBC Human Trafficking Debate” para. 9). *On Black Sisters' Street* is thus a sensitive and nuanced portrayal of the survival strategies that are employed by those whose lives have been relegated to the margins of a contemporary globalised world. All four protagonists express a sense of desolation and frustration at the failure of their personal dreams and ambitions. These aspirations are, however, often influenced by notions of wealth and progress that are informed by “the global distribution and imaging of objects” that conjure the “fantasies of success and nightmares of failure that play such key roles in decisions to join a modern ‘feeding frenzy’” (Ojwang 12). My engagement with Unigwe’s novel therefore interrogates the role of commodity aesthetics in the “production of new forms of slavery” (12) and the impact that the global capitalist system has on the characters depicted in the novel. Situating the narrative in Belgium and Nigeria, Unigwe underscores the unstable, fragmentary nature of the lives of the women in her novel. The text’s multiple perspectives and non-linear narrative structure also reflects this sense of multiplicity; of occupying differing social and cultural spaces. This will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

Mediating Desire: Exploitation, Class and Commodity Fetishism

On Black Sisters' Street commences with a delighted Sisi walking on the streets of Antwerp. She has lived in Belgium for a number of years and, as is revealed later in the novel, she has begun a relationship with a thirty-year-old Belgian man, and has decided to resign from her job as a sex worker. She meets Luc at an African Pentecostal Church – a congregation that is an amalgamation of various African migrants living in Belgium. She is the most adventurous

of the four women, taking time alone to explore Antwerp. She travels into the city and, each time she does, she adopts a different character and meets new people. Learning the rhythms and different facets of the city, Sisi begins “living out her fantasies” (Unigwe 255). Thus the first few paragraphs of the novel resound with her optimism:

The world was exactly as it should be. No more and definitely no less. She had the love a good man. A house. And her own money – still new and fresh and the healthiest shade of green – the thought of it buoyed her and gave her a rush that made her hum... She was already becoming someone else. Metamorphosing. A word she recalled from a long-ago biology lecture. Sloughing off a life that no longer suited her. (1)

Sisi is presented as a woman whose dreams and desires are about to be realised and yet there is, even at the outset, a hint that all is not well. Sisi’s list of requirements for a fulfilling life include ‘a man’ and not just any man but a ‘good’ man, a house, implying that she has never owned one, and money. Her euphoria at having “brand-new wealth” (1) indicates that she has occupied a social and economic position that does not accord her access to a viable income. Furthermore, she believes the money “would buy her forgetfulness, even from memories” that torment her sleep (1). As she walks through the streets of Antwerp “touching things that take her fancy,” this episode acquires a fetishistic quality as she arrives at what she describes as a “true epiphany” (1). For the first time, she is able to interact with the objects and goods she has desired for so long. The moment acquires an almost spiritual quality for Sisi who, however, does not recognise that her ideals of success mask her embedded assimilation of a global advertising and commodity culture that markets a lifestyle of materialist excess.

As Arjun Appadurai argues:

Global advertising is the key technology for the worldwide dissemination of a plethora of creative and culturally well-chosen ideas of consumer agency. These images of agency are increasingly distortions of a world of merchandising so subtle that the consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser. (“Disjuncture and Difference” 329-330)

Thus Sisi’s desire for the trinkets and objects that she believes will finally bring her happiness is informed by “a world where subjects are confounded with objects, where relationships are more often grounded in exploitation than mutual care, and where human

beings are subordinated to a dehumanizing process that impoverishes them” (Lutz 57). Sisi’s decision to resort to sex work as a means of survival is also influenced by social pressures from her family who also share her desire for a more elaborate lifestyle. As their only child, her parents have pinned all their aspirations on her education in the hope that this will elevate them out poverty and improve their social status. They live in a cramped flat in “Ogba,” a low income neighbourhood in Lagos. Her father fervently believes that “the only way to a better life is education” – an education he was denied because his “parents needed him to get a job and help out with his brothers and sisters” (18-19). Thus, he never “studied beyond secondary school” or beyond the age of 19 (19). He spends most of his adult life as a lower rung “administrative clerk for a company he does not care much for, being a ‘Yes, sir, No sir’ subordinate to men who were not much smarter than he was” (19). His salary is only a pittance and he just manages to provide the basic needs for his family. “I could have been an engineer,” he often muses wistfully to himself (19). It is therefore not simply that Sisi must earn a larger living to support her ageing parents; the lure of a plusher lifestyle propels both Sisi’s and her parents’ ambitions. They hope, for instance, that one day Sisi will be given a “company car with a company driver” (20). The desire for luxury goods is evidenced in the conversation mother and daughter have after Sisi’s university graduation:

I shall sit in the back of your car with you. You in the owner’s corner. And your driver shall drive us *fia fia fia* around Lagos. [...] (a Ford? A Daewoo? A Peugeot?) I hope it’s a Peugeot, for that brand has served this country well (20).

With the car would also come a two bedroom house in a Lagos suburb for both Sisi and her parents. The house would have “a sitting room with a large coloured TV. A kitchen with an electric cooker. And cupboards for all the pots and pans and plates they would need” (21). They would also employ “a gateman” and “a steward” (21). Success for Sisi and her family means a comfortable upper-class lifestyle and not necessarily systemic change that alters the structures that perpetuate poverty and inequality. As Dan Ojwang notes: “it is commodity

kitsch – castles, clean streets, impossibly white sheets, plush Lagos suburbs, dreams of easy pots and pans – that, together with the realities of postcolonial failure, foster the desire to get-up-and-go” (12).

On the one hand, the objects to which Sisi and her parents aspire seem so normative in the contemporary globalised world that it appears unjust to suggest that Sisi and her family should just accept being unable to purchase them. On the other, however, one could argue that in fact these ‘dreams’ are steeped in a consumerist culture that is ‘Western’ in its ethos and value system. Stuart Hall argues that the process known as globalisation does not occur evenly across the world with each political and cultural sphere having parallel influence (“The Question of Cultural Identity” 305). Quoting Kevin Robbins, Hall highlights the continued imperialism associated with contemporary modernity with its perceived centre in the ‘Western’ world. Robbins states:

For all that it has projected itself as transhistorical and transnational, as the transcendent and universalizing force of modernization and modernity, global capitalism has in reality been about westernization – the export of western commodities, values, priorities, ways of life. In a process of unequal cultural encounter, ‘foreign’ populations have been compelled to be the subjects and subalterns of western empire, while, no less significantly, the west has come face to face with the ‘alien’ and ‘exotic’ culture of its ‘Other’. Globalization, as it dissolves the barriers of distance makes the encounter of the colonial centre and colonized periphery immediate and intense. (qtd. in Hall 305)

This assertion is also exemplified in Ama’s life who dreams of escaping to Europe or America:

She wanted to go to London. She had seen pictures of London Bridge on TV. Her other choices were Las Vegas. Or Monaco... The names sounded elegant, like places where people walked around all day well dressed and doing nothing more strenuous than carrying a handbag... She imagined being in Monaco, all rich and grown up, without the huge menacing presence of her father, drinking and smoking in defiance of her father’s rules and twisting to the Devil’s music. (Unigwe 133-134)

Ama has been sexually abused by her step-father, Brother Cyril, a religious zealot who, while portraying the image of propriety in public, molests her in secret. The abuse commences on her eighth birthday and continues until she reaches puberty. Thirteen years later, Brother Cyril expels Ama from home after she reacts angrily one day following his rebuke for failing

her university entrance exams for the second year in a row; he accuses her of being lazy and incompetent (147). Ama confronts Brother Cyril for his abuse and she is forced to migrate to Lagos to live with her aunt. In the heat of the argument, Brother Cyril makes claims for his generosity and magnanimity for marrying Ama's mother who already had a child before he proposed: "I am not your father. I took your mother in and this is all the thanks I get. All the thanks I get for saving you from being a bastard" (148). As a wealthy religious leader, Brother Cyril holds power both economically and politically and Ama's mother will not defy him. She declines to defend her daughter against her husband from whom she gains her status in society. Throughout Brother Cyril's sustained sexual and emotional abuse, Ama fantasises about a life in the 'Western' world. Thus, while Ama's perception of the 'West' is informed by the same discourses of economic prosperity that inform Sisi's choices, she also views the 'West' as a place of refuge and safety where she can make a fresh start and recreate her identity, purging herself of her past and the abuse and violence she has experienced in her native country. When Dele, while a customer at her aunt's café in Lagos, offers her the opportunity to work in Europe, Ama at first declines, vexed that he would even suggest that she become a sex worker. Later she reasons:

Brother Cyril had taken what he wanted no questions asked. No please or may I or could I. Discarding her when she no longer sufficed. And strange men taking and paying for her services. And it would not even be in Lagos. But Overseas. Which earned you respect just for being there (166).

While Efe's entry into sex work does not mirror Ama's exactly, she too is compelled to become a sex worker. Efe has her first sexual encounter at sixteen "at the back of her father's flat" with Titus, a married, middle-aged Lagos business man who promises her "new clothes" and "new shoes" (49). For Efe, it is not just any new clothes or shoes. She thinks precisely of owning the denim trousers she had seen the week before at the second-hand market: "blue jeans with a metallic v emblazoned like something glorious on the back pocket"

(50). Day dreaming about what else she will be able to purchase with the money Titus will give her, Efe muses to herself:

Perhaps she ought to get a blue T-shirt [...]. She had seen a light blue one that would go very well with the trousers. And shoes to go with the trousers. May be something high-heeled and sleek. Definitely something high-heeled and sleek. Something to make her look like a real Lagos chick, a veritable *sisi Eko*. (51)

And for her lips, she would buy “bright mauve lipstick” (51). The image of what exemplifies a beautiful cosmopolitan Lagos woman seems to mirror images of the same in the ‘Western’ world. As Hall also notes:

Cultural flows and global consumerism between nations create the possibilities of ‘shared identities – as ‘customers’ for the same goods, ‘clients’ for the same services, ‘audiences’ for the same messages and images – between people who are far removed from one another in time and space. (“The Question of Cultural Identity” 302)

Except that for Efe the goods that she purchases are from a second-hand market in downtown Lagos. These are goods that have often been manufactured in “Taiwan or Hong Kong or South Korea for the New York, Los Angeles, London or Rome high street shop,” after which they make their way into small trader markets in developing countries like Nigeria (302). Thus, Efe joins a global cultural milieu that she admires from afar but does so only at the expense of her body. Despite being able to purchase “bits of happiness” (Unigwe 56) in Lagos markets and upscale stores, as she in turn is purchased by Titus, she still retains her social and economic position as part of the lower classes of the city. That position is further entrenched when she gets pregnant and Titus abandons her. When the baby is three weeks old Efe takes him to his father’s home reasoning that “Titus had enough money” (69) to ensure that his son would “grow up away from the slum she was raised in” (69). But her attempts are rebuffed, by a silent Titus and his hostile wife who insults and humiliates Efe: “useless girl. *Ashawo*. May a thousand flees invade your pubic hair. Useless goat. Shameless whore, *ashawo*” (70). Instead of confronting her husband, Titus’s wife blames Efe for the pregnancy. She is complicit in Efe’s oppression and fears for her own social position as a wealthy man’s

spouse. She attempts to deal with the threat Efe poses as quickly as possible by insulting her as she throws her out of the house:

‘Just take a look at yourself. Small girl like you, what were you doing with a man?’ she yells at Efe. ‘At your age what were you doing spreading your legs for a man, eh? Which girl from a good home goes around sleeping with a man who is old enough to be her father eh?’ (71)

In her tirade, Titus’s wife casts Efe as a pariah. Not only has Efe transgressed class boundaries by daring to aspire to a higher social status but also gender and moral boundaries. Her attempts to force Titus to take parental responsibility challenge patriarchal norms that protect and allow men like him to take advantage of teenage girls. But her actions do not result in any form of emancipation. Rather, in the years that follow, Efe so internalises her position so that, when she meets Dele, she views his overtures as complimentary and does not see his darker intentions. Working two jobs as a cleaning woman, Efe answers an advertisement for a similar position. Dele puts up the posters on the street knowing that the likely candidates will be desperate impoverished women like Efe (78). After months of friendly banter between them and Dele giving her “huge bonuses at holiday times” (80) to gain her trust, Efe agrees to go to Belgium, which as Dele tells her, is “a country wey dey Europe. Next door to London,” (81). As she considers the offer, she asks herself: “who did not want to go abroad?” (81). She is persuaded to go because Dele’s offer seems too good to refuse.

Stuart Hall’s conceptions are useful here and should caution us against reading the interest in the ‘West’ adopted by the characters in Unigwe’s novel as just another imperialist invasion. To do so is once again to categorise the people living in the so called ‘peripheries’ within essentialist notions of identity that prevail in colonial ideology. Hall notes that:

Societies on the periphery have always been open to ‘Western’ cultural influences and now more so. The idea that these are ‘closed’ places – ethnically pure, culturally traditional, undisturbed until yesterday by the raptures of modernity – is a Western fantasy about ‘otherness’: a ‘colonial fantasy’ maintained about the periphery by the West, which tends to like its natives ‘pure’ and its exotic places ‘untouched.’ (“The Question of Cultural Identity” 305)

What Unigwe's novel makes clear, however, is that it is precisely this racist discourse that fuels the continuing trade in 'native' and 'exotic' 'black' bodies; as the narrator notes: Efe "would be Dele and Sons Limited's export" (82) – a product also made readily available due to increasingly porous global boundaries. This exploitation and dehumanisation of the 'black' woman echoes the novel's epigraph, a quotation from Zimbabwean author Brian Chikwava's short story "7th Street Alchemy" which reads: "Armed with a vagina and the will to survive, she knew that destitution would never lay claim to her."⁴ For the female characters of *On Black Sisters' Street*, the vagina is a commodity which they offer for sale and is the site of their exploitation as Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce's experiences so vividly illustrate.

Wigs, Masks and Mirrors: Performing Diasporic Identities

The objectification of 'black' women in the global imaginary that propels the trafficking of women from Africa such as the protagonists in Unigwe's novel, results in layers of false consciousness. Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce define themselves through the racialised male gaze but they also assimilate ideals of beauty that seem to contradict it. On the one hand, they are 'beautiful' because they are 'black' and thus their erotic exoticism draws the attention of the 'white' European customer but on the other they are repulsive because they are 'black'. Dele plays on this stereotype informing Efe that she will not lack work because "they ['black' women] were in great demand by white men, tired of their women wanting a bit of colour and spice" (84). But he does not warn the women or prepare them for the marginalisation they will experience as 'black' women in a society where they are deemed not to belong; to do so would jeopardise his livelihood.

Efe performs her complexly located position as both desired and excluded other by donning wigs and using lightening creams which turn her skin into a "sallow yellow." She has

⁴Chikwava's short story was the 2004 Caine Prize winner. The narrative follows the female protagonist's struggle to make a living in Harare, Zimbabwe's capital city.

internalised the racist and sexist discourse that have cast her as the ‘other’ (Hall “New Ethnicities” 446). But it is not just Efe who undergoes this internalisation of self as ‘other’. Sisi first meets Dele in a hair salon in Nigeria where he has brought a young girl to get her hair done. Tina, the hairdresser suggests that the young girl braids her hair but Dele protests (31). Tina must put relaxer on her hair to make look like “*oyibo* woman,” like a “white woman” (31). This processing of the women’s hair might appear simply as a matter of style and taste but, as Kobena Mercer suggests:

Hair is never a straightforward biological ‘fact’ because it is almost always groomed, prepared, cut, concealed and generally ‘worked upon’ by human hands. Such practices socialize hair, making it the medium of significant ‘statements’ about self and society and the codes of value that bind them, or don’t. In this way hair is merely a raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices which thus invest it with ‘meanings’ and ‘value.’ (34)

The straightening of ‘black’ women’s hair therefore illustrates the pervasiveness of the ideology of whiteness as the norm. Culturally significant, ‘straight’ hair becomes associated with ‘white’ superiority and with a higher social status. Following Stuart Hall, Mercer further elaborates on this point:

Opportunities for social mobility are therefore determined by one’s ranking on the ethnic scale and involve the negotiation not only of socio-economic factors such as wealth, income, education and marriage, but also of less easily changeable elements of status symbolism such as the shape of one’s nose or the shade of one’s blackness. In the complexity of this social code, hair functions as a key ‘ethnic signifier’ because, compared with bodily shape or facial features, it can be changed more easily by cultural practices such as straightening. Caught on the cusp between self and society, nature and culture, the malleability of hair makes it a sensitive area of expression. (36)

Hence, Efe bleaches her skin and wears wigs to disguise and strip away her ‘blackness,’ imagining this transformation causes her to be more attractive. She presumes she is no longer associated with what she has internalised as a repellent ‘blackness’ and is perhaps closer to a more preferable ‘mixed race’ phenotype. Her body as a site of contestation is hybridised but only substituting one stereotype for another. Efe’s actions can therefore be read within ‘Western’ historic racial paradigms that defined women of ‘mixed race’ as ‘the tragic mulatto’ “beautiful, sexually attractive and often exotic, the prototype of the smouldering, sexy heroine

whose partly white blood makes her ‘acceptable,’ even attractive to white men, but whose indelible ‘stain’ of ‘black’ blood condemns her to a tragic conclusion” (Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* 34). The tragedy of Efe’s life thus lies in the apparent futility of her transmutation. She remains a migrant sex worker but like the other three women she both resists and acquiesces to the various systems that govern their lives.

The women in *On Black Sister’s Street* not only have to create their sense of self through this historical discourse of racism but they have to do so as fetishes, playing up to the fantasies of their ‘clients’. Efe’s wigs and lightening creams are therefore also ‘masks’ that she dons to disguise her identity and enable her to take on the multiple roles she is required to play as a prostitute. The women are quite literally cast as objects of the male gaze through the glass booths in which they have to sit on the streets of Antwerp’s red light district or in the pubs where they are on parade for their male clients (Unigwe 236-237). Their exhibition of their bodies as examples of ‘exotic’ ‘black’ sexuality evokes that of Sarah Baartman, the South African woman placed on display in London and Paris in the early nineteenth century. She was often chained in a cage placed on a raised platform for the audiences view and, as Hall notes, was “reduced to her body and her body in turn to her sexual organs” (Hall, *Representation* 265-266). Her body parts were eventually preserved for ‘scientific’ study after her death and exhibited at the Musee De L’Homme in Paris (266). Like Baartman, the women in *On Black Sisters’ Street* are fetishized through a process of disavowal, where their bodies are cast as embodiments of “primitive” sexual desire – repulsive yet erotic.

Nevertheless, in a subversive turn that challenges this understanding of the gender relations in the novel, Unigwe writes an interracial relationship into the heart of the events in the novel. Luc and Sisi’s relationship offers a glimpse of the possibility of change. While one can read Luc as a stereotypical representation of a ‘white’ man interested only in the ‘exotic’ Sisi and therefore steeped in the racist discourses that cast Sisi as the Other, I would argue

otherwise. He does not usurp or attempt to control Sisi and he is not one of Sisi's 'clients.' In a bid to discourage his advances, Sisi even invites Luc to the brothel and dresses in her "trade mark" provocative work clothes but Luc does not vilify her (267). He does not seem to buy into the hallmarks of imperialist discourse and it is their relationship which provides Sisi with the impetus she needs to resign from her job. But that act of defiance is met with violent reprisal. Segun, Dele and Madam's henchman, follows Sisi to Luc's house and after ordering her into his car, bludgeons her to death with a hammer (292-293). In the face of Madam's control and power, escape appears impossible. Thus Sisi's disruption of the expected social order, for which she is killed, is rendered futile. On the other hand, Sisi's rebellion is indicative of the existence of just such a space for resistance. Unigwe offers the possibility for change, no matter how small but also illustrates how fragile that possibility can be.

Diaspora identities like those of Efe, Sisi, Ama and Joyce are therefore formed through multiple phases and processes. Sisi, for instance, negotiates various spaces to arrive at the point where she chooses eventually to resign from her job as an act of defiance against Madam and Dele and as an assertion of her agency. She accepts that her identity is fluid and performative but this is an ambivalent process. Sisi's first act of reinvention occurs when she decides to change her name from 'Chisom' to 'Sisi' before she leaves Nigeria for Belgium. She does so as an act of self-protection and as a disavowal of her past Nigerian life. In Belgium, she would be 'Sisi,' a name that means "sister" in Shona; "Roland, one of her classmates in university, had told her that she reminded him of his sister back in Bulawayo" in Zimbabwe where he comes from and so he called her 'Sisi' "throughout the four years they were classmates" (44). "Chisom," she decides in language that echoes that of the global advertising industry, "would be airbrushed out of existence, at least for a while. Once she hit the big time she would reincarnate again as Chisom" (44). But once she has taken on the name of Sisi, it proves difficult to escape the role she has decided to play – not only because

she is murdered and therefore cannot reclaim her identity as Chisom but according to Daria Tunca, because:

Sisi becomes a prisoner of her own misguided choices – her subjectivity, in other words, contributes to her own subjection. When she decides to leave prostitution and ‘get rid of Sisi’ she fails to realise that the murder of her Doppelganger amounts to her own death. In the end, Chisom cannot simply ‘reclaim her life’ and disengage herself from Sisi – the two seem to have become inextricably linked. (“Redressing the ‘Narrative Balance”” 12)

Both Sisi and Joyce utilise pseudonyms once they arrive in Belgium while Ama and Efe both utilise their birth names but do not reveal much else. Their precarious position as irregular migrants means they cannot disclose their full names for fear of deportation or violent reprisal from their pimps who control their livelihoods in this ‘new’ country. They avoid making any intimate relationships or friendships that would endanger their position in Belgium. Turning to the police or authorities for help is further discouraged by the fact that often they would be expected to testify against their pimps. According to the 2010 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report published by the US State Department:

In many countries, immigration relief and social services are offered only to victim-witnesses purely as incentives to cooperate. They do not aim to restore the dignity or health of the person who was victimized. Optimally, the response to this human rights abuse should focus on all victims, offering them the opportunity to access shelter, comprehensive services, and in certain cases, immigration relief. Repatriation of foreign victims should not be the first response, but should be undertaken as an informed decision and done so in a manner that serves the best interest of the victim. (*Trafficking in Persons Report* 14)

Thus Sisi’s murder is a punitive action that also serves as a warning to the other women ensuring that they do not attempt to escape or rebel against their ‘owners.’ Bisi Olateru Olagbegi and Latiff Salawu Aminu affirm that the domineering control Dele and Madam assert is accurately illustrative of the ruthlessness evidenced in human trafficking cartels:

Nigerian traffickers abroad have established mafia-like organizations of control in most destination countries. They are well-connected and operate in cartels and networks which are difficult and risky to infiltrate. They are ruthless and will sacrifice anyone to cover their tracks and remain hidden. They use codes for communication among themselves. Traffickers do not always operate in groups, however, and some engage in solo operations. (24 -25)

The trafficking of young women such as Joyce, Efe, Sisi and Ama occurs despite increasingly draconian measures to police national borders particularly in Europe and

America. Passports, for example, are meant as a guarantee that those who own them are legitimate citizens of a certain nation state but as Rushdie asserts:

Across the frontier, the world's secret truths move unhindered every day. Inspectors doze or pocket dirty money, and the world's narcotics and armaments, its dangerous ideas, all the contrabands of the age, the wanted ones, those who do have something to declare but do not declare it, slip by. (*Step Across This Line* 354)

While Rushdie's comments can be construed as a celebration of the marginal over the hegemonic, for women like Unigwe's protagonists, who are considered part of the "contrabands of the age," the risks they take to cross the world's frontiers are often dangerous and sometimes fatal. Olagbegi and Aminu further argue that the stronger and more rigid border controls become, particularly from the developing world to the 'West,' the more likely this will exacerbate human trafficking:

The intensification of border controls in wealthier countries elevates the risks associated with illegal migration, thereby creating demand for the perceived sophistication of human traffickers. Thus, the greater the barriers to migration, the more sought after and expensive the traffickers' services and the more lucrative the trafficking business becomes. It should therefore be explored whether the creation of more open and legal channels of migration to western countries might not greatly reduce human trafficking. (41)

Madam and Dele, for instance, maintain a rigid secrecy surrounding their activities across two continents. Madam pays off policemen in Antwerp and Dele disguises himself as a legitimate entrepreneur. Dele acquires illegal passports for his 'exports' which Madam then confiscates from the women. She forces the women to seek asylum by trading on racial stereotypes and perceptions of Africa. Upon arrival in Belgium, Madam instructs Sisi to "go and register at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs" where she is to claim that she is "from Liberia" and has escaped from marauding rebels fighting for deposed president, Charles Taylor (119-120). She is also expected to "look sad, cry, wail" and "tear her hair out" (121). Madam is confident the story will persuade "white people who enjoy sad stories. They love to hear about us killing each other, about us hacking each other's heads off in senseless ethnic conflicts. The more macabre the story, the better" (121). Madam takes advantage of the racist notions of Africa that continue to pervade global discourse about the continent. She capitalises on stereotypes

not just of Africa but of ‘Westerners’ as voyeurs of violence associated with the non-western world.

The shared experience of migration and diasporic existence, however, does not create unmitigated loyalties and friendships among the women in the novel. Unigwe destabilises the notion of a unified Nigerian or African diaspora and in so doing questions the idea of a homogenous African identity. As Donald Carter argues in his introduction to the compilation

New African Diasporas:

Networks that in part constitute but also sustain diasporas (ethnicity, gender, clan, kinship, religious and or affiliation) are not transnational linkages fixed in place for all time but rather structures that come to be essentially ‘reworked’ in practices varying from one place to another. (Carter “Preface” x)

One particular incident in the novel clearly illustrates this. Efe throws a party to mourn the death of her grandmother back in Nigeria – emulating traditions she witnessed as a child.

Contemplating the guest list, Efe recounts the various nationalities of the people who would attend the party:

There would be lots of Ghanaians – those people were everywhere. Nigerians of course. A sprinkling of East Africans – Kenyans who ate samosas and had no traditional clothes and complained about the pepper in Nigerian food, not really African. (9)

This quotation not only exemplifies Carter’s assertion but it also displays Efe’s own prejudices and stereotyping, an indication that, to use Tunca’s words, illustrates the fact that “Africans too can be biased” (6). In an article entitled “The Burden of my Being,” Unigwe explores just such a concept. She relates an incident where she attempts to get a visa into Kenya to attend a writers’ workshop. The visa attendant is indifferent and uncooperative when Unigwe attempts to utilise her Nigerian passport. She informs Unigwe that her application will take up to six weeks to be processed and it may or may not be granted. When the author mentions that she has an EU passport, however, the receptionist’s attitude immediately changes: “madam your visa application will only take twenty-four hours to process” (“The Burden of My Being” 7). Unigwe is visibly disappointed:

I don't want to enter Africa as a naturalized European [...] why should I be forced to enter Kenya with a Belgian passport? I try to be grateful that I have an alternative nationality. The way I feel when I vote to keep the extreme right out of power. The way I felt when I ran for council elections in 2000. However, that gratitude is reluctant to surface this time. (10)

Unigwe's acceptance of her Belgian identity does not diminish the impact of the discrimination she faces because of her affiliation with Nigeria. She decries the proliferation of stereotypes associated with Nigeria in popular global discourse:

Maybe I have been an ostrich, I think, hiding my head in the sand. Refusing to see what is obvious: the way my Nigerian passport is thumbed and closely examined by immigration officials. [...] Strange, middle-aged white women coming up to me at readings to tell me that they have got Nigerian daughters-in-law, *schoondochters*, who want to go on vacation to Nigeria with their children and is it safe? What with the problems in the Delta region. And from what they hear, the lack of drinking water. And lack of proper healthcare. And lack of gas. And oh, let us not forget the robberies. (12)

The quotation above is also important because it illustrates the paradox involved in Unigwe's role as author. In highlighting the prejudice of the 'middle-aged white women' she encounters at book readings she inadvertently also offers a critique of contemporary Nigerian society where issues like a lack of proper healthcare are a reality for millions of people. The fact that Nigeria is a state in which basic services such as water, gas, education and health care are not provided to all its citizens is part of what compels the protagonists of *On Black Sisters' Street* to migrate. Unigwe's positioning in both Belgium and Nigeria provides her with the critical distance that allows to 'write back to Africa' while engaging with issues of diasporic existence in Europe.

Unigwe also interrogates issues like corruption among Nigerians themselves which has created a political environment where only the elite thrive. In a paper discussing the institutionalisation of corruption and its impact on political culture, sociologist M.A.O Aluko asserts that "corruption now appears to have become a permanent feature of the Nigerian polity" (Aluko 394). While critics differ as to the cause of the malaise, with some pointing to the colonial history of Nigeria, what is clear is that the country's current state of economic

underdevelopment is in part due to institutionalised corruption and theft. Omotola *et al* point out that institutionalised corruption has its origins in colonial rule arguing that the process led to the emergence of “two publics in Africa” (Omotola 217). The citizenry are expected to abide by a moral and ethical code but the state rulers adopted a violent, self-serving system of accumulation and greed. Abimola Adesoji and Olukemi Rotimi assert that historically, even within governments that were not overthrown specifically for corruption, the practice was still endemic (161). Between 1990 and 1991, for instance, General Ibrahim Babangida’s regime “could not account for billions of dollars which Nigeria earned as revenue from the sales of crude oil during the Gulf War” (161). The authors also note that about 12.2 billion US dollars were “diverted to off-budget accounts” and “at least 2.1 billion US dollars’ worth of petroleum revenues” (162) were also unaccounted for in 1990. When one considers that Nigeria has experienced military coups since 1966 and that each successive government has been implicated in pilfering billions in public funds, the consequences have been disastrous for a majority of the country’s people. Unigwe’s novel makes clear the way in which characters like Madam and Dele thrive within such a system. In some ways perhaps they are the consummate exemplars of the global consumer capitalists. They comprehend the market and understand how to work the system.

Unigwe demonstrates that the corruption in Nigeria operates in tandem with that of the Belgian system. Madam and Dele are criminals who commit murder but who are never apprehended. In their reasoning, Sisi’s death is a ‘pragmatic’ solution to an impending threat, and they are merely protecting their business ventures. Besides, as Dele assures Madam on the phone as they discuss Sisi’s murder, there are plenty more women to replace her: “Yes, Kate I trust you go take the necessary steps. Dat gal jus fin my trouble. She cost me money. How much money you pay de police? [...] tell de gals make dem no try insubordinate me [...] Na good worker we lose but gals full boku in Lagos. I get three lined up” (Unigwe 295). Dele

and Madam show no regard for Sisi's humanity and are mercenary in their pursuit of money and profit. They utilise death and violence as a means of ensuring that they maintain their authority and power. As with the work of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sefi Atta, death and violence take many forms in Unigwe's novel. They are catalysts that drive the narrative of *On Black Sisters' Street* forward and are thus instrumental in her writing project.

Narrative Form and the Tropes of Death and Violence

The presence of death and violence is made manifest at the outset of Unigwe's novel. A sense of foreboding overrides Sisi's elation as she walks on the streets of Antwerp. She wonders what the other women on the Zwartzusterstraat are doing without her. Unigwe follows this scene with one that depicts Joyce, Ama and Efe in their bathroom at the brothel preparing for work. Sisi's absence causes some consternation but none of the women vocalise their anxiety. Thinking to herself, Joyce hints at the possibility of violent repercussions should Sisi not arrive on time: "How could anyone forget what Madam did to Efe the night she turned up late for work? Nothing could excuse her behaviour, Madam said. Not even the fact of her grandmother's death" (4). The lives of the women on the Zwartzusterstaart are characterised by acts of withholding and silence.

As I have previously mentioned, the women's recourse to silence is due to Madam and Dele domineering authority. But I would also assert that their actions are a defence mechanism against the trauma and violence they have experienced. Thus, due to the fact that they live in small quarters with little or no privacy, they remain obliquely closed off to one another. Rushing in and out of the bathroom in the house applying make-up, they barely speak to one another. Joyce is "stuffing a denim bag with deodorant, a beach towel, and her "Smiley, a lubricant gel, innocuously packaged in a plastic see-through teddy bear with an orange conical hat smile" (Unigwe 3). Efe puts an electric toothbrush in a duffel bag; "in an inner pocket of the bag is a picture of a boy wearing a baseball cap" (3). She carries the

picture with her everywhere, a reminder of her son, whom she left in Nigeria. The shared physical intimacy of the tiny bathroom demonstrates the very public nature of their lives. Products associated with personal hygiene and sexuality are treated as mere tools of the trade as privacy is negated and the commoditisation of the women's bodies becomes a substantive reality.

Unigwe, however, focuses on the contents of each woman's handbag in order to break the silence that shrouds each woman's identity. She reveals the multiple strategies they utilise to assert themselves and resist the dehumanisation they experience. Joyce's teddy bear, for instance can be read as a subconscious desire to reclaim a measure of dignity and agency, perhaps even innocence, given the circumstances in which she is forced to live. She is the only one of the four women who, upon leaving Nigeria, does not know the real reason she is travelling to Belgium. She is duped by Dele into believing that she will be working as a nanny. Joyce does not suspect any foul play because she is introduced to Dele by her Nigerian boyfriend, Polycarp, who is reluctant to marry her because of his parents' disapproval. His involvement with sending her to Europe is his way of ending their relationship. Joyce is a "foreigner" and does not meet his parents' stereotype of what a 'good' Nigerian wife ought to be, a woman of Igbo origin who understands the community's history and culture. (225)

Polycarp has brought Joyce with him to Nigeria from a refugee camp in south Sudan after he began a relationship with her there. He is posted to the country as part of an African Union peacekeeping force. Not only does Joyce face the trauma of having to migrate from her home in Sudan after her family is massacred and she is violently raped by rebel soldiers, she is then unwittingly coerced into a life of prostitution. In a bid to appease his parents, Polycarp utilises Dele's services to garner employment for Joyce in Europe. "I know a man who'll help you," he tells Joyce, "I will pay him and he can get you to London. America. Anywhere you choose" (225). Although it is unclear whether Polycarp is aware of Dele's nefarious plans, he

still manipulates Joyce into leaving, exemplifying the gender inequalities that the women in the novel face. At their first meeting Dele gives her a new name 'Joyce' claiming her birth name 'Alek' is too masculine: "the name has to go, Alek. Sound too much like Alex. Man's name. We no wan' men. *Oti oo*. Give am woman name. Fine fine name for fine gal like her" (230). Daria Tunca argues that this act of renaming further re-inscribes Joyce's oppression and "metaphorically re-enacts the rape suffered by the 'tomboy[ish]' Alek at the hands of ruthless soldiers in the Sudan" (8). Tunca also posits that "Dele's obliteration of the name also amounts to the blotting out of her family history" (8).

Joyce can therefore be said to have suffered a figurative death as she is forced to abandon her past and adopt a new name and in doing so an identity that is not her own but one that she must master. This fragmentation of identity is reflected in the novel's narrative structure where a combination of direct speech, third-person narration, and flashbacks create an alienating effect that provokes what I would argue calls for a more attentive and engaged reading experience. The constant vacillation between personal narratives allows Unigwe to critically engage with issues of disruption, negation and death. The novel does not have chapters that provide a continuous flow of events instead it introduces each character in various sections throughout the narrative. For instance, the opening section is entitled '12 May 2006', the date when Sisi is murdered. It is then followed by a section entitled 'Zwartzusterstraat,' the scene describing the wake for Efe's grandmother. After which, Sisi's death is revealed, as the women congregate in the living room of the brothel. Each woman's story is presented by a means of flashbacks which occur intermittently between sections "devoted to Sisi" (Tunca 4) and present-day moments in the brothel. The structuring of the novel in this way suggests that Joyce, Ama and Efe are able to recuperate their identities and histories through the retelling of their lives after Sisi's death. Though traumatising, her death is also the medium by which the other three women narrate their own stories, freeing

themselves them from the isolation that they feel. The retelling of their personal histories humanises them and disrupts the discourses that have defined them as sexual objects. The women also become witnesses to each other's suffering and in doing so provide a measure of freedom for each other. Moreover, in Joyce's case, Dele's attempt to rename her is invalidated as she reclaims her Sudanese heritage and identifies herself once again as "Alek" her grandmother's name which she was given at birth. As Tunca observes:

Because Sisi's life and death remain a mystery to her colleagues, the metanarrative function of her story is even clearer than in the cases of the other protagonists. Since Sisi is no longer able to share the events of her life with her friends, the narrator's recounting of her destiny to the *reader* salvages the character from anonymity. In a way, the novel restores her individuality, and even her dignity, by retracing her life and her quest for subjectivity. (12)

Though written primarily in a seemingly realist mode, *On Black Sisters' Street* nevertheless does not presume to offer a holistic vision of the world it portrays. Following Jean Francois Lyotard, I would suggest that Unigwe utilises elements of postmodern aesthetics

to put forward the unrepresentable in the presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. (81)

In depicting the difficult, complex spaces occupied by the women of the Zwarte Zusterstraat, the author endeavours to articulate the "unrepresentable," that which has been made taboo and remains hidden or unspoken. Unigwe's imaging of Sisi's death in magical realist terms at the conclusion of the novel can therefore be understood as the novel's attempts to further represent the intangible; the surprise and the sheer terror that grips Sisi as Segun murders her (Unigwe 293). Her existence in the intangible realm between life and death is thus a metaphoric representation of the unfixed, fluid nature of the identities of the novel's protagonists.

In "the instant between almost dying and stone-cold dead, the instant when the soul is still able to fly, Sisi escapes her body and flies to Lagos" (293-296). This journey, like the one she

undertakes to Antwerp, retains a sense of uncertainty. She does not, however, display the overt naivety and optimism that she did at the beginning and is instead accorded a measure of power. Sisi is reborn in spirit form, not once again as Chisom, as she had assumed she would once she had quit her life as a prostitute, but in a much more intangible yet seemingly more powerful form. Floating into Dele's house, she whispers into the ears of his sleeping daughters, pronouncing curses over them: "may your lives be bad. May you never enjoy love. May your father suffer as much as mine will when he hears I am gone. May you ruin him" (296). In her paranormal state, Dele is incapable of controlling Sisi; even in death, she remains defiant. Still, Dele's daughters' sleep remains uninterrupted and it is unclear whether or not Sisi's evocations will have any effect at all. Her rebellion, though elevated to metaphysical status, does not have a substantive impact. Dele and Madam's business continues and in fact Efe becomes a madam herself setting up her own brothel in Antwerp. Sisi is implicated in the very violence and oppression that brings about her own death. The vengeance she attempts to inflict is directed at two female children and not against the man who bears responsibility for her suffering. Like Madam, whose name the reader learns is 'Kate' as she and Dele plot Sisi's death, Efe and Sisi utilise their agency not to fight the system but become active participants in the oppression that they themselves have lived through. Like *Purple Hibiscus*, the open ended conclusion in *On Black Sisters' Street* provides no catharsis and therefore implicates its readers in the difficulties and complexities of the postcolonial existence that it depicts.

CONCLUSION

The victims of capitalist colonialism continue to accumulate around the world: there is no shortage of the dead, but mourning will not save them retrospectively. (David Lloyd “Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?” 222)

For the past to become a principle of action in the present, we have to manage to admit the reality of loss and stop living in the past instead of integrating it in to the present as that which must sustain human dialogue. In any case, the complete restitution of the past is not only terrifying, but also a clear impossibility. (Achille Mbembe “Interview with Mbembe” para. 30)

Terror at the Mall

On September 21, 2013, I was seated in a theatre in downtown Nairobi when we heard rumours that armed thugs had attacked Westgate mall in Westlands, an upmarket suburb not too far from the city’s business district. But I was not particularly concerned. Crime is an accepted part of the city’s identity. In any case, I was far enough away and did not feel threatened or in any particular sense of danger. That is until I received a call from a broadcaster for which I freelance asking for extra hands on what would become the biggest news story of the year. As I arrived at Westgate there was a palpable sense of fear. How could this be happening? Soldiers were lined up against the building and military tanks were driving down the streets. This was not a Kenya I recognised. For four days we camped out at a Hindu temple neighbouring the mall. That is where they relegated the journalists and the volunteers who came to help the injured and supply the security forces with food and water. Four armed Somali men had attacked the mall and shot and killed everyone who could not quote the Koran, including women and children. The total number of dead, according to official government figures, was 67 people. The Somali Islamist group, Al-Shabaab, claimed responsibility for the attack. But Kenyan security forces were criticised for being ill prepared and for bungling the response to the siege. A parliamentary report, released in February 2014, affirmed this:

Security services were warned about an impending attack but ‘there was general laxity among the police over terror alerts’ in the run up to the September 21 raid.

It also noted that the crack police RECCE unit had cornered the four gunmen in one place earlier in the raid, but lost the advantage because of poor coordination when the army moved in. (Akwiri, “Kenya Needs Better Security” para. 3-4)

The controversy and vigorous debate in the months and weeks that followed has quietly disappeared from the public domain; superseded by other more recent news and events.

However, Al Shabaab attacks have continued with several bombings in Nairobi, Mombasa and Mandera, northeastern Kenya, close to the border with Somalia. Al Shabaab also regularly conduct assaults on civilian and government targets in Somalia’s capital, Mogadishu.

Al-Shabaab, which means “The Youth” was formed by remnants of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) of Somalia which seized power after a US-backed and sponsored Transitional Federal Government failed to win public approval” in the early 2000s (Kabukuru, “How East Africa” 19). The ICU began instituting a more severe form of Sharia law and were rumoured to support global jihadist group Al Qaeda. With American support, Ethiopian troops invaded Somalia and installed a new Transitional Federal Government in 2007 (19). Thus the presence of Ethiopian troops was viewed as a hostile occupation – radicalising Al Shabaab even further. The group officially joined Al Qaeda and was transformed into a “militant organisation capable of waging an insurgency inside and outside Somalia’s borders” (19). Over the years, Al Shabaab conducted sporadic attacks on Kenya in revenge for what they regarded as Kenya’s pro-Western and anti-Islamist politics. In 2011, Kenya sent troops to Somalia as part of an Africa Union peacekeeping force known as AMISOM after Al Shabaab bombings in Nairobi, in the coastal city, Mombasa, began to affect its tourism industry.

But while many media reports reflect the official narrative, that casts Al-Shabaab as being merely antagonistic towards the perceived hegemony of Somalia’s neighbouring governments, the situation is far more ambiguous. As Kabukuru points out, Kenya’s military

involvement in Somalia did not begin with Al Shabaab but has its history in the early 1920s when the “Anglo-Italian Boundary Commission agreed to the Treaty of London of 25 July 1924, to demarcate the boundary between the Protectorate of Kenya and Italian Somaliland” (Kabukuru, “The Kenya-Ethiopia Defence Pact” 63). The treaty also meant that a greater Somalia nation-state that included parts of Kenya and Ethiopia was rendered unattainable. Thus tensions between the three nations persisted throughout the pre and post-independence years of the 1960s and 70s. This culminated in a “fully-fledged Ethiopia-Somalia border conflict” with “an estimated death toll of over 4,000 people” (64). The two countries received millions of dollars in support and weaponry from the United States, Britain and Russia, all of which were at the time involved in the Cold War. Britain and the United backed Ethiopia but the government’s Marxist policies meant the Soviet Union began to support both sides. The Ogaden war “exposed intricate continental geopolitical interests” that were part of a complex global system. The collapse of the Somali government in 1991 after the overthrow of military leader, Mohammed Siad Barre, created a power vacuum and precipitated the collapse of the horn of Africa nation. Thus Kenya and Ethiopia’s continued presence in Somalia is not merely an exercise in regional peacemaking: but part of a larger and longer history that has virtually been silenced. AMISOM’s mission also aligns with the ideology of a global “War on Terror” that accords it international support and legitimacy. The Westgate mall siege was the most high-profile of Al-Shabaab’s raids. It illustrated the threat that rising militant groups pose for the security and stability of not just the East African region but the whole continent.

Nigeria is also battling a growing Islamist insurgency in the northeast. Boko Haram emerged in 2009. “Loosely translated from the region’s Hausa language, [Boko Haram] means “Western education is forbidden” (Chothia para. 8). The group “is fighting to overthrow the government and create an Islamic state” (para. 1). Boko Haram regularly conducts bombings, abductions and assassinations. In recent months, they have stepped up

their attacks across Nigeria's borders into Cameroon, Chad and Niger. Like Al Shabaab, the emergence of Boko Haram can be traced to geo-political histories that have often marginalised local populations. According to Farouk Chothia, Boko Haram:

Has a fighting force of thousands of men and cells that specialise in bombings. Through its raids on military bases and banks, it has gained control of vast amounts of weapons and money. (para. 36)

Chothia further contends:

The threat Boko Haram poses will disappear only if Nigeria's government manages to reduce the region's chronic poverty and builds an education system which gains the support of local Muslims. (para. 37)

While issues like terrorism are not addressed directly in the course of this project, the Westgate mall assault illustrates the continued intersection between gender, religion, violence and power in the African postcolony. One of the most visceral reminders of this is the presence, in most public buildings and spaces, of security checks and metal detectors. It is a peculiar and unnerving feeling to have a stranger pat you down or rifle through your bags. But like the characters in *Everything Good Will Come*, *Purple Hibiscus* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, survival requires a certain measure of compromise and acquiescence.

Furthermore, as Mbembe points out, the postcolonial regime is defined by what he describes as "necropower." According to Mbembe, necropower is:

wielded both by states and by what, following Deleuze and Guattari, we should call "war machines." War machines are made up of segments of armed men that split up, merge and superimpose each other depending on the circumstances. Polymorphous and diffuse organizations, war machines are characterized by their capacity for metamorphosis. They combine a plurality of functions and operate through capture, looting and predation. ("Interview with Mbembe" para. 21)

Characterised by militancy and rebel movements, war machines therefore form a significant part of the contemporary African landscape. The emergence of groups like Al Shabaab, and those described in the texts in this study, attest to this. Adichie, Atta and Unigwe, however, find alternative ways to engage with these realities by integrating the voices of African

women. They interrogate the place of women living in states defined by necropower where “the ultimate site of deployment of this new form of sovereignty is no longer the body as such, but the dead body of the ‘civilian’” (21). For Atta and Adichie, setting their novels in the years following Nigeria’s independence allows them the freedom to creatively imagine the postcolony through a female lens. In doing so, they also imagine possibilities for an as-yet-determined future, not just for women in Africa, but for the continent. The ambiguous endings in each of the three texts are underwritten by a utopian sensibility that each of the protagonists displays. As I have argued, however, this optimism is overshadowed by the events in the novels themselves which point towards a much less predictable present and future. The postcolony is, as Mbembe asserts, a “concatenation of multiple temporalities. Because of the entanglement of these multiple temporalities, Africa is evolving in multiple and overlapping directions simultaneously” (Mbembe, “Interview with Achille Mbembe” para.12). What this means, as far as Adichie, Atta and Unigwe’s own work is concerned, is that the question of identity that these three young African writers grapple with in their texts also remains open ended. The future of the African woman as is her subjectivity is also evolving.

White Means Pure

On January 1st, 2013, the British broadcaster, the BBC published an article on the proliferation of skin lighteners in Africa. The article titled: “Africa: Where Black is Not Really Beautiful,” commences with details of a study by the University of Cape Town that “suggests that one woman in three in South Africa bleaches her skin” (Fihlani para. 2). The article further argues that many of the respondents in the research “use skin-lighteners because they want ‘white skin’” (para. 2). Skin lighteners are often made using toxic chemicals like mercury that are associated with “blood cancers such as leukaemia and cancers of the liver and kidneys, as well as a severe skin condition called ochronosis, a form of hyper-pigmentation which causes the skin to turn a dark purple shade” (para. 10). Despite

the risks, people across the continent continue to use skin lighteners. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 70 percent of women in Nigeria are reported to use skin lightening products. Other high consuming countries are South Africa, Mali, Senegal, and Togo (WHO 1). While the BBC article does not state conclusively why so many Africans are drawn to skin lighteners, what is evident is the continued normalisation of whiteness even in contemporary Africa. The cultural and media landscape is still predominantly filled with images that project being 'black' as an aberration. In 2014, Nigerian popstar Dencia caused outrage on social media when she launched her skin product known as "whitenicious." Along with the product are before and after photographs of the singer with a much lighter skin pigmentation. In an interview with U.K. broadcaster Channel Four, Dencia defended her product stating: "White means pure, not necessarily skin, but in general." She further states: "Some people they don't feel confident, they don't feel, pure, they don't feel clean with dark spots" (Dencia, "White Means Pure" Online Video Clip). Dencia's statement not only reveals a disturbing racial self-hatred but also how deeply intertwined issues of race and identity remain in Africa. From Kambili to Sheri and Enitan, to all the women in *On Black Sisters' Street*, the question of what it means to be female and African is one that they all contend with. The global commoditisation of racialised tropes of beauty that Unigwe addresses in her novel are mirrored in the fetishism Dencia attaches to whiteness. In his essay, "The Fact of Blackness" Fanon writes:

The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man. Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* 83)

Fanon's understanding of race and identity is particularly insightful given the continued proliferation of products such as skin lighteners. As Ziauddin Sardar further observes in his discussion of Fanon's canonical text *Black Skin, White Masks*:

When the black man comes into contact with the white world he goes through an experience of sensitization. His ego collapses. His self-esteem evaporates. He ceases to be a self-motivated person. The entire purpose of his behavior is to emulate the white man, to become like him, and thus hope to be accepted as a man. (Sardar, "Forward to the 2008 Edition," xiii)

The self-abnegation evidenced in characters like Efe in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and in Dencia's comments illustrates the relevance of the work of the three authors in this project. Unlike Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, however, Dencia is not a sex worker and yet she still accepts the commodification of her body as part of her brand.

Adichie's latest novel, *Americanah*, addresses the same thematic concerns. It is set in both Nigeria and the United States and tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who struggles to make a life for herself in America after immigrating there for her university education. Ifemelu rekindles her relationship with her old high school boyfriend Obinze once she returns to Nigeria after her studies. The novel is both a love story and a narrative that deals with "racism, displacement, migration, border-crossing and borderlessness, liberalism, Nigerian middle class apathy, Nigerian ruling class exploitation, colourism and, hairism, and white American do-gooders" (Sajna 42). Hair is a central motif in *Americanah*, which Adichie utilises to address and challenge the dynamics of race and identity. When Ifemelu decides to cut her chemically treated, relaxed hair and return to her 'natural' hair, she is compelled to explain her actions to some of her colleagues whose responses "indicate the many ways in which natural hair is misrecognized" (Manzo 4).

Stylistically, *Americanah* differs somewhat from *Purple Hibiscus* with both Obinze and Ifemelu deployed as focalisers in different parts of the narrative. Nevertheless, the novel's critical acclaim has firmly established Adichie as one of Africa's most celebrated writers of her generation. Atta and Unigwe have also both published new novels. Atta's *A Bit of Difference* was released in 2014 and is also set in the diaspora. Like *Everything Good Will Come*, *A Bit of Difference* is centered around a charismatic female protagonist. Deola Bello is born and raised in Ikoyi Park, the same affluent suburb in Lagos where Enitan and Sheri grow

up. She is sent to boarding school in England and returns to Nigeria for a business assignment. Deola is concerned that she remains unmarried and childless at the age of 39. Her fears are echoed in Unigwe's novel, *Night Dancer*, a multi-generation narrative that details the lives of three women, Adamma, her mother, Eze and Rapu, the house help who displaces her mistress after Eze is unable to bear a child. Yet again, questions of gender and the role of women in contemporary African city emerge.

Some critics have, however, suggested that these three authors and others like them, who are located in the diaspora, often capitulate to the demands of their 'Western' readers. Specifically referring to writers living in the United States, Ashleigh Harris argues that the "the positioning of these writers "in and for America," compromises their ability to effectively engage with "African spaces." Harris reiterates: "the African everyday life becomes subsumed into the demands of American readership" (Harris 6). These demands place pressure on authors "to not only treat but rather to write to a script of Africa already determined in the minds of American readers" (5). But, as I have argued, Adichie, Atta and Unigwe are not merely reproducing the narrative demands of the Western publishing industry. Rather, they struggle within and against those boundaries to create novels that are nuanced and complex. Their work tackles subjects that are often taboo: domestic violence, rape, sexual exploitation and, especially in Unigwe's case, documents the lives of African women located on society's margins and who are often forgotten.

Adichie, Unigwe and Atta are also part of a growing list of other emerging women writers like Helen Oyeyemi, Adoabi Tricia Nwaubani, Unoma Azuah and Taiye Selasi who are producing work that defy generic categorisations and who offer a much more nuanced understanding of Africa and its people.

Africa Rising?

The re-imagining of Africa is, however, fraught with contradictions. In recent times the narrative of Africa rising has dominated headlines. Adichie, Atta and Unigwe find some of their acclaim within this dynamic. It is a narrative that celebrates African agency and heralds a new economic boom for the continent. Images of death, poverty and disease are slowly being replaced by those of ingenuity, growth and independence. “Lions on the Move” is the term the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) utilised for the title of their 2010 report in reference to the surge of economic progress experienced across the continent. The report presents data which supports the notion of Africa as the last great frontier for capitalist expansion:

The key reasons behind Africa’s growth surge were improved political and macroeconomic stability and microeconomic reforms. To start with, several African countries halted their deadly hostilities, creating the political stability necessary to foster economic growth. Next, Africa’s economies grew healthier as governments lowered inflation, trimmed foreign debt, and shrunk their budget deficits. Finally, African governments increasingly adopted policies to energize markets. They privatized state-owned enterprises, reduced trade barriers, cut corporate taxes, and strengthened regulatory and legal systems. Although many governments still have a long way to go, these important first steps enabled a private business sector to emerge. (“Lions on the Move” 2)

But despite the optimism, the question ultimately is: whose Africa is rising? As the three novels in this study demonstrate, only a small middle-class minority can claim the benefits of cosmopolitanism engendered in the economic growth that the MGI report heralds. Addressing similar concerns Zainab Usman notes:

As the African middle-class goes shopping with their swelled-up wallets and designer purses in Lagos or in London, many more Africans go to bed hungry as the gap between the nouveau riche shoppers and the underclass in the urban fringes grows wider. Increasingly, it begs the question of whether this bulging middle-class is the consequence of a mass number of Africans leaving the poverty trap, as is the case in China and Brazil – both of which have seen tens of millions lifted out of poverty – or whether a previously existing middle-class in the margins was just buoyed back to vibrancy? (Usman para. 10)

The cronyism, corruption and mismanagement evidenced in *Everything Good Will Come* also remains one of Africa's most crippling problems; contributing to the growing inequality gap on the continent. Nigeria is currently struggling with "a plummeting currency, steep budget cuts, corruption scandals and diving oil prices," (Cocks and Payne para. 1). Nigeria's commercial capital has a population of about 21 million people. Two thirds of whom "live in what are effectively slums with no reliable electricity or water" (Cocks para. 22)

Across the continent, inequality is further exacerbated by global policies that disenfranchise African states. Judith Cavanagh warns that Africa is losing far more than it is gaining:

Whilst the continent receives \$30 billion in aid a year, this figure pales in comparison to the \$192 billion leaving the continent via illicit financial flows, the repatriation of multinational company profits, debt repayments, loss of skilled workers, illegal logging and fishing, and the costs imposed as a result of climate change. (Cavanagh, "Who Aids Whom?" para. 3)

The continent's global positioning as a source of resources thus remains largely unchanged since the colonial era. Moreover, Africa is still experiencing patches of conflict which continue to undermine regional development and cooperation. This is something of which Adichie, Atta and Unigwe are well aware. Unigwe, for instance, understands that the desire for a better life that propels the women protagonists in *On Black Sisters' Street* to leave Nigeria is informed equally by her country's own fragile socio-economic system and the appeal of a global commodity culture.

The numbers of people migrating from Nigeria to the 'West' continue to rise. In fact Nigeria is one of three Sub-Saharan African countries with the largest number of migrants making their way to Europe largely through illegal smuggling networks. The other two are Somalia and Eritrea. Somalia as I have mentioned is only now starting to rebuild itself after decades of war while Eritrea is led by an autocratic regime accused of numerous human rights abuses. Many irregular migrants make the perilous journey across North Africa through the Mediterranean Sea to Greece or Italy. By August 2015, more than 2,000 people had died

attempting to cross into Europe. Over 3,000 deaths were recorded in 2014. (Al Jazeera, “The Deadly Business of Migrant Smuggling” para. 1-16). War and increasing civil unrest in North Africa and the Middle East have further exacerbated what analysts and the media have described as “Europe’s migrant crisis.” According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the migrant death toll could reach up to 30,000 in 2015. (Al Jazeera, “IOM: Mediterranean death toll could top 30,000 in 2015” para. 2). For the hundreds of thousands of people and families arriving in Europe, the imagined gains far outweigh any dangers they may face. And while it is not within the scope of this project to discuss in detail the complexities surrounding the current migration debate, it is worth mentioning. As journalist and editor, John Lloyd notes:

Europe will not become more welcoming than it is now – likely, it will become less so. Men and women in zones of conflict or poverty will not become less determined to grasp a better future. And violent jihadist groups will not cease to infiltrate their militants into Europe through the cover of migration. Thus the hope that the migrant crisis will abate, or be held back indefinitely, is a futile one. The rock will get rockier, the hard places harder. Popular and democratic pressure will close up Europe. (Lloyd, para. 11-12)

Unigwe’s novel is particularly apt given these recent events. *On Black Sisters’ Street* speaks to the specific experiences of irregular African migrant sex workers but also touches on a global phenomenon that affects millions of people. The challenges migrants face as they try to survive and make a life for themselves are echoed in the lives of Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce. Yet Unigwe’s women characters do not readily assume a victim persona. Instead, they make choices that, like Enitan, Sheri, Beatrice and Kambili, provide them with a measure of agency. As Mbembe argues in his discussion of the future of the African postcolony:

We cannot evade the violent aspects of our history [...] But there is no way we will overcome the neurosis of victimization if, by transforming the past into our subjective present, we root our identities in injury alone. (“Interview with Mbembe” para. 30-31)

We Should All Be Feminists

Still, the process of “overcoming the neurosis of victimization,” as these three texts demonstrate, can be tremendously difficult. For her 2013 TedxEuston talk titled, “We Should

All Be Feminists,” Adichie tackles the subject of gender equality. According to the author, a feminist is “a man or a woman who says, ‘Yes, there’s a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it, we must do better” (Adichie, “We Should All Be Feminists” Online Video Clip). She champions the dismantling of gendered systems that make victims not just of women but of men:

I would like to ask today that we begin to dream about and plan for a different world; a fairer world; a world of happier men and happier women who are truer to themselves. And this is how to start. We must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently. We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity becomes this hard small cage and we put boys inside the cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves because they have to be, in Nigeria speak, “hard man.” (“We Should All Be Feminists” Online Video Clip)

Adichie demonstrates just how damaging gendered systems like these can be through Eugene and Beatrice’s relationship. Eugene is brought up in two distinctly patriarchal cultures that teach him to “be afraid of fear” and “weakness.” The result is a psychologically damaged man who not only destroys his family but inscribes them with both physical and emotional scars that may never heal. Similarly, Efe, Ama, Joyce and Sisi are compelled to hide their true selves quite literally as irregular migrants in Belgium and as sex workers who have to don a different mask for each of their clients. The consequences for those who challenge the status quo can be devastating as evidenced by Sisi’s murder and Jaja’s imprisonment at the conclusion of *Purple Hibiscus*. Nevertheless, as Adichie’s title suggests: “we should all be feminists;” a rallying cry that is reflected is also reflected in Atta and Unigwe’s work. All three women authors ascribe to a feminism that seeks to undermine and transcend traditional and hegemonic systems. It is a feminism that takes cognisance of both the local and the global; incorporating the ideals and perspectives of those relegated to the margins of a globalised world.

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