

Chapter Four

STRIPPED OF THE VESTIGES OF DIGNITY: UNPACKING THE KNAPSACK OF FEMALE- SUFFOCATION IN JOHN MUNONYE'S *OIL MAN OF OBANGE* AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS*

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Abstract

*The undercurrents of the inferior female and the marginalised mother which are considerably discernible in *Oil Man of Obange* and *Purple Hibiscus* alert the reader to the complex and, often, objectionable practices which continue to sustain patriarchal ideologies and encourage their related female-suffocating philosophies to thrive within a typical family unit. The expression, "female-suffocation" as deployed in this paper refers to the stifling of female productivity, talents and creative energies which, predictably, result when females attempt strict conformity to patriarchal ideals of normative femininity. Drawing on the conceptual framework of the theory of feminism as espoused by Akachi Ezeigbo, this chapter argues that while the two main mother characters in the selected texts are marginalised by the general patriarchal system of their individual environments, however, they fail to utilise the necessary emancipation tools of sensitiveness, wisdom, self-improvement and resilience. Therefore, by wholly accepting the socio-familial constructions of femaleness which devalue them, they unwittingly or otherwise, encourage their husbands' unrestrained hegemonic stance. In this manner, the characters yield to self-tyranny and ultimately become both the victimisers and the victimised. Consequently, they do not only promote and prolong the legacy of gender inequality but also remain complicit in their own devaluations, indignities and afflictions.*

Keywords: Gender, Equity, Female-suffocation, Dignity, Self-tyranny

Introduction

A common thread of female-suffocation which results from the multi-level oppression that females often experience in the domestic sphere, runs through Munonye and Adichie's depictions of mother characters in *Oil Man of Obange* and *Purple Hibiscus*. The idea of "female-suffocation" as employed in the paper, refers to the smothering of female productivity, skills and innovative drives which often result as females attempt to conform strictly to patriarchal ideals of normative femininity. Thus, overtime, the individual female talents become completely stifled, their creative energies dissipated and they seem to resign themselves to the impression that they are less than their male counterparts. Consequently, they internalise the notion that their positions in the family, rightly, do not count much. This chapter takes the mother characters of Munonye's Marcellina and Adichie's Beatrice as its focus. It also maintains, unequivocally, that contrary to popular belief, mothers are the head of homes (directs domestic affairs, most activities revolves around her) while fathers are the head of families (in charge of decision-making which governs the entire household). Thus, it attempts to lay bare the reasons females often deal with a sense of indignity, powerlessness and suffocation even in their conscious or unconscious positions as heads of homes.

Women's marital situations and lived-experiences as wives and mothers in comparison with their male counterparts, appear to validate Alissa Trotz's notion of "the domestic as an essentially unchanging feminine and bounded domain" (371). In this domain where male superiority is very visible, the females are often constrained by motherhood and home-keeping roles, so they depend on their male counterparts for economic sustenance. Correspondingly, the feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst, Nancy Chodorow, explains that masculine identification is gender role identification and by contrast, "feminine identification is predominantly parental" (176). Similarly, Joana Russ's *The Female Man* is a feminist utopian novel where she explores the relationship between gender and roles. Her core perspective on gender-role differences revolves around the social, economic, cultural, political, and intellectual superiority of the male gender. Fascinatingly, the Italian fatherhood scholar and Jungian analyst, Luigi Zoja, in his "Centaur: A Violent Masculine Myth," asserts that in various historical times, the female identity is characterised by relative stability. The male identity, by contrast, he maintains, is much more recent since it is linked to society and history, and therefore more fragile (18). If Zoja's assertion holds true, why are female characters often depicted as unstable, ignorant, needy, fragile and passive, in representational texts?

Remarkably, from the classical to postmodern periods, the image of the suffocated-female who is passive, disrespected and economically dependent on her spouse, has remained a familiar portrait. This is not only common in representational texts, but also in the broadcast media, especially, on television and in film. In *Literature*, for instance, Mrs. Bennet has no personal source of

income, lacks self-confidence and is wholly dependent on her husband financially. In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Mrs. Wingfield's sense of helplessness when her husband deserts her and their children, is palpable. In Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Linda Lowman depends on her husband financially and hopes the fortunes of the family will turn around for the better from his efforts, in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Nwoye's mother is expected to take orders from her husband without asking questions in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and lastly, Marcellina and Beatrice are socially and economically dependent on their husbands in John Munonye's *Oil Man of Obange* (1958) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004). The above-mentioned instances are representations of mother characters crafted at different periods with diverse settings across geographic boundaries and literary genres, and they point to the portrait of the suffocated wife and mother.

What makes a particular gender biologically inferior or superior? Why should the institution of marriage function as a site which limits only females? Why would the female gender accept to be categorised as less-deserving of dignity and honour? What makes maleness superior to femaleness when the later predates the former, as Zoja has avowed? Motherhood is as much a privileged position as fatherhood and women are heads of homes as much as men are heads of families. Aduke Adebayo laments that in spite of all the advocacy for gender equality, women still belong to the minority group and are denied some privileges and freedom which society normally allows for the dominant group – the male gender (281). Women's inferiority, then, becomes the product of socio-cultural systems which have produced and fostered innumerable other inequalities, inferiorities, discriminations, and degradations. Therefore, the domestic sphere continues to remain a space where women define their place in society by accepting a tag anchored on home-centeredness and inferiority.

To gain deeper insight into female-suffocation, Ezeigbo's concept of snail-sense feminism is used as a theoretical and analytical instrument. Her concept is hinged on the significance of females "being wise, sensitive, resilient and dogged or determined" (28). She explains that just like the snail crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, cracks and rough terrains smoothly with a well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects (27), females could leverage on snail-sense strategy to weather the storm of martial relationships. Thus, Ezeigbo insists that the emphasis is on "the ability of the snail to smoothen rough spaces to enable its movement [to be] easy." In the like manner, she counsels that the Nigerian woman ought to be wise, sensitive and proactive in her quest for justice and self-actualisation (37). Undoubtedly, Munonye and Adichie's engagement with representations of mother characters in the selected texts provide rich instances of the suffocated female who can benefit from snail-sense tactic. Thus, this segment attempts

to unpack and examine how gender inequality and subjectivity are constructed within the family unit which serve to marginalise and oppress women as wives and mothers in *Oil Man of Obange* and *Purple Hibiscus*. The examination taken into consideration the three broad lens of female subjectivity in the home by male spouses (husbands), the wider socio-cultural dictates/expectations (of normative femininity) and the notion of “female self-tyranny” (which is induced by internalised patriarchal ideologies). Interestingly, in their individual homes in Enugu and Obange, Munonye and Adichie’s mother characters appear overwhelmingly burdened by the back-breaking knapsacks of suffocation, indignity and Self-tyranny which they straddle along in their roles as wives and mothers.

Female Suffocation, Dignity and Gender-equality at Crossroads in *Oil Man of Obange* and *Purple Hibiscus*

Munonye and Adichie are among writers who have used their artistic imaginations as veritable tools to create awareness of how socio-cultural and familial gender ideals/expectations intersect and combine to sustain gender inequality which ensues in female suffocation. Both writers depict indignities against females, oppression and gender inequality along with their workings in a typical monogamic family setting. Trapped by the ideals of culturally sanctioned normative femininity, women often acquiesce and as a result, the socio-cultural stamp of approval on female marginalisation is preserved. Therefore, while Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* is depicted as timid, passive and voiceless, on the other hand, Marcellina in *Oil Man of Obange* has a voice. However, her voice strongly resonates with the expression of the archetypal patriarchal woman whose actions and inactions serve to perpetuate female suffocation within the family and, thus, foster gender inequality within the larger society.

To explicate the issue of female suffocation, loss of dignity and gender inequality as depicted in the selected texts, Munonye’s *Oil Man of Obange* is firstly examined. The novel is set during the convoluted era of the colonial encounter and depicts the experience of the protagonist, Jeri, who attempts to forge a new identity for himself as a husband and a father in the Obange community. Jeri marries Marcellina shortly after a brutal land dispute which nearly claimed his life before he decides to renounce ownership to those lands to save his life. Thus, having been left with little or no lands at all, Jeri realises that the income from subsistence farming cannot sustain the kind of training he plans for his six children – Mica, Celia, Luke, Anto, Frank and Fred. Therefore, he settles with the idea of palm oil trading. Eventually, the daily details of Jeri’s lived-experience as a petty oil trader and a father who must provide for his family and also train all his six children according to Western style of education, becomes tricky.

Although Marcellina Oko is portrayed as a happily married woman in *Oil Man of Obange*, however, the brand of happiness which exists in the midst of grueling lack and poverty demands further examination and categorisation. When the reader gets to meet Marcellina in the first chapter of the novel, Jeri is setting out to Otta where he sells his palm oil and she is “following quite close behind” (2) to wish him well on his efforts for the day. Their level of poverty is underscored by the physical appearance of Jeri – his clothes were in tatters and visibly threadbare. In spite of this, the reader is intimated that the community admires Marcellina and her husband because they “behaved towards each other like brother and sister – one heart, one mind, and one will in nearly everything” (21). Their admiration is informed by how the couple shares bonds of love and respect for each other. Nevertheless, the reality is that the Oko family is impoverished and is in dire need of additional income which Marcellina could have provided had she been enterprising. Unlike Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*, who lives with a highly controlling and restrictive husband, Marcellina enjoys a considerable degree of freedom. Nevertheless, she restricts her activities to housekeeping and laments that Jeri suffers too much because “he has nobody to assist him” (27). Does Jeri really suffer because he has no one to help him? What disqualifies her as an individual who is capable of helping to alleviate the family financial stress when Jeri, makes only a profit of four shillings on each trip to Otta? Is there really no money-yielding activities she could engage in from the home to augment his meagre income from petty oil trading? Without the severe economic hardship of the Okos, Marcellina may be truly happily married. Her self-inflicted sense of suffocation rests on her absolute dependency on her husband which not only erodes her dignity and sense of self-worth but also puts her in a disadvantaged position as a mother, wife and head of home who must command the respect of her children and husband.

Marcellina hardly leaves the small Oko family house of raffia-mat roof and red-earth walls to explore her immediate neighborhood except when she goes for the goat fodder or takes the children to school. She appears to have internalised the socio-familial construction of the place of the married woman which must be at home. Ketu Katrack perceptively argues that as a female child grows from childhood to womanhood to motherhood, she is controlled and owned by her father, her husband, and then, her sons (163). Katrack’s argument rings true of Marcellina’s passive posture as a controlled wife and a mother. Her passivity is, predictably, what feeds female oppression in typical patriarchal systems, societies and households. However, the truth still remains that she is first marginalised as a result of her gender as a female who must mind the home and completely depend on her husband financially. Eventually, she becomes a woman with very limited knowledge (no special skills) and no personal income she could draw from. Not being knowledgeable also has its own price tags - thus, her mistreatment of the wound she had sustained from a machete-cut while gathering fodder for the family goats would prove fatal.

Marcellina is in the early stage of pregnancy and ignorantly applies sand to the fresh open-wound as a first-aid treatment. She may have used this method at other times and achieved desired result, however, she lacks the knowledge of the implication of her reduced immunity at this time. Thus, she becomes sick from tetanus infection and dies. Marcellina represents the culturally-defined good mother and subservient wife. By Obange standard, she is a good woman – albeit a dead one who will not be there to nurture as well as watch her young children grow and will ultimately be forgotten.

Ezeigbo asserts that the concept of snail-sense feminism is anchored on the ability to “get round obstacles no matter how formidable the situation might be by exercising effective skills and sensitive attitude” (37). Effective skills and sensitive attitude are derived from specific training. Marcellina is not knowledgeable and seems not to be interested in any form of self-improvement. A remarkable situation which speaks to her deficiency and general ignorance is the awkward conversation on girl education. Her sons, Luke and Micah, ask her why girls such as their sister, Celia, are allowed to enjoy free education while school fees are compulsory for all boys. At this question, Marcellina appears completely clueless. The question started with Luke:

‘Mamma, why is it that girls don’t pay school fees?’ Lu asked.
 ‘Well, it’s because ...’ she hesitated. Nobody thought about it.
 ‘Don’t you now your father would have had a lot more to pay if it wasn’t like that?’ Micah laughed: ‘Is that the reason?’
 ‘I don’t know. Maybe or maybe not.’ (16)

Her hesitations and eventual reply call into question her sense of self-confidence even in the presence of her young children. How does a wife, mother and head of home such as Marcellina not know that her daughter is allowed free education because the educational institution in Obange does not regard female education as vital to her eventual role as a home keeper? Typically, through the process of socialisation within the family and in the educational institutions, the female child is made to feel inferior, thus, she easily consents to dropping out of school at the slightest pressure of marriage consideration. As a young girl, Marcellina had dropped out of school as would also be her daughter’s case towards the ending of the novel. Evidently, before her marriage, Marcellina, like her sister-in-law, Onugo, had already internalised the idea that female education is of no use. Now as a wife and a mother, she believes that even her male children are superior to her. This sense of inferiority further depreciates her sense of self-worth and dignity which she also foists on her young daughter, Celia.

Through the motherhood conduct and attitudes of Marcellina, the reader recognises how inequalities are reinforced in a family unit by females as heads

of homes. She seems to epitomise the idea that women ultimately yield to self-tyranny and, thus, become their own number one enemy. For instance, Marcellina's actions and inactions against the female gender (her own gender) is lucidly realised each time she unwittingly or otherwise, endorses sibling relationships which perpetuate male superiority and dominance against female inferiority and subordination in the home. She accomplishes this through male-child-favouritism, sexist remarks and the different gender-based/biased trainings and privileges she confers on her children. This is particularly evident when the burden of keeping all the children in school becomes too much for Jeri to bear alone and he suggests that one of the children may be withdrawn from school. At this resolution, Marcellina quickly recommends that her second child and only daughter, Celia, should drop from school because of her gender. Ezeigbo makes case for women to use the snail-sense approach by exploiting "a well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by the harsh objects (27). Hard objects, in this instance, could be regarded as female suffocation or other harmful marital realities. However, Marcellina's "well-lubricated tongue" seems to be a reversal of the essence of Ezeigbo's feminist survival tactic and serves to function against her own gender (female) while male superiority and dominance are promoted. In this manner, not only does she become both the victim and the victimised, but she also becomes the patriarchal female - the quintessential male-supremacy apologist. Her patriarchal leanings could also be seen from the different table manners she inculcates in her male and female children which gives her five male children a sense of superiority and makes her daughter feel inferior to the rest of her siblings. In the second chapter of the text where the children are happily eating dinner together, in groups of three persons per a serving, Marcellina cautions only her daughter:

Celia, you must do something about the size of the lump you send down your throat,' she said in a harsh tone. 'You seem to have forgotten that you are a girl and that girls who swallow big balls of *foufou* don't easily get husbands. Celia felt discomfited at the rebuke, more so when Lu began laughing. 'Nobody will agree to marry her' [...] Lu said. Mama, I hope mine is not too big,' asked Anto [...] 'I don't think it is, my son,' she pronounced. 'So long as it doesn't choke you. (18-19)

By this reprimand, Marcellina suffocates Celia and also seems to make clear the importance of marriage for the girl child to Celia. Russ's remarkable lines in her *The Female Man* - "[m]en succeed. Women get married. Men fail. Women get married [...] men start wars. Women get married" (63) is polarised against Marcellina's patriarchal disposition. Russ's text parodies male gender superiority, and appears like a direct disapproval of Marcellina's internalised

patriarchal philosophy which amounts to self-tyranny. Thus, by calling Celia to order concerning her preferred size of *foufou* while all her sons (even the little twins, Frank and Fred) are allowed to swallow large sizes of *foufou* “so long as it doesn't choke” (19) them, Marcellina has also acceded to self-suffocation.

Comparably, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* is useful in understanding her vision of female-suffocation in the diverse manner she represents the mistreatment, deprivation and humiliation of women. *Purple Hibiscus* is set in Enugu, south eastern Nigeria and details the story of the wealthy Achike household. This is a family where the two young children (Kambili and Jaja) and their mother (Beatrice) live in fear of their piously Catholic husband and father, Eugene, who is also referred to as Papa. Intriguingly, Eugene Achike is a Knight of St. John who heads a family where domestic violence and oppression are strangely blended with religion, education and love. Like the Judeo-Christian God, the loving creator who has the “power to kill and to make alive” (1 Sam 2:6), Eugene operates with absolute power. He physically harms every member of his family and, each time he injures any of them, he personally takes them to the hospital to revive them again.

The mother character, Beatrice, demonstrates a different kind of docility - a debilitating one. She is initially introduced to the reader in the first chapter of the text as Mama after she returns from church on a Palm Sunday when “things started to fall apart” (1) in their mansion in Enugu. Remarkably, some of the first things to fall apart are her prized little ornaments. The figurines shatter when Eugene flings his heavy missal in an attempt to hit Jaja for refusing to take communion in church. When the tiny white enamel figurines broke, Beatrice quickly bends down in a kneeling position and begins to pick the pieces. She is, no doubts, unhappy at the destruction of her figurines but she does not seem to have the courage/freedom to express her emotions. As a result, she gets busy and buries her anger in the action of gathering the broken pieces of the ornament - a task she could have easily delegated to either of her children or a domestic staff. But in the narrative, Beatrice already seems like a wounded women who has continued to endure incessant beatings from her religious but very violent husband. Her daughter, Kambili recounts that her mother “polished them [the figurines] each time I heard sounds from their bedroom, like something being banged against the door” (10). The girl also narrates a particular severe but secret beatings which usually occur as sounds of something being banged as the door of her parents' bedroom. She counts the banging-against-the-door sound and divulges that:

it was at nineteen when the sounds stopped. I heard the door open.
Papa's gait on the stairs sounded heavier, more awkward, than usual.

I stepped out of my room just as Jaja came out of his. We stood at the landing and watched Papa descend. Mama was slung over his shoulder like the jute of rice sacks of rice his factory workers bought in bulk at the Seme Border. (33)

After the nineteen-count beating, Eugene slings Beatrice over his shoulder like a jute of rice sack and takes her to the hospital for treatment. He is passionately devoted to the Catholic Church, however, his hegemonic position and stranglehold not only on his wife, Beatrice, but on every member of his family, seem to defy comprehension. The Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, defines hegemony as a form of control by a dominant class which is based on consent and coercion (57). In this regard, the emphasis of Gramsci is hinged on consent and coercion. Beatrice has a phenomenal capacity for absorbing beatings from her husband without even attempting to cry out for her children's help or intervention becomes a form of form of consent. In the excerpt above, Beatrice is hit against the door of their bedroom - her daughter, Kambili counts nineteen times! Why would a woman allow her husband to hit her nineteen times without doing something to stop such battery? Beatrice appears intimidated by Eugene to the extent she believes that she faces an uncertain future without his financial support, thus, she unwittingly consents to spousal cruelty. However, in spite of the oppression she suffers, Beatrice still thinks her husband is overworked and deserves the family's sympathy. She also thinks Eugene suffers greatly as a result of the burden of providing for both his family and other philanthropic gestures/activities he is saddled with in the church and within his immediate society in Enugu.

Consequently, Beatrice appears trapped within the confines of the expectations from her as a wife and a mother by her cruel and oppressive husband, Eugene. Firstly, by consciously or unconsciously breaking/destroying the figurines which she so often meticulously polishes as a way of escape from the horror Eugene daily subjects her which marks her lived-experience as a married woman, is a form of violence. Thus, he seems to make certain his wife is denied the only object of succor she resorts and clings to in order to achieve some level of sanity and balance. For instance, when Beatrice returns from the hospital after she suffers miscarriage as a result of being beaten by Eugene, without resting, she immediately prepares to polish her figurines. What the reader sees in this character is an awkward figure of a very wealthy philanthropist, referred to as Mama, who:

stood hugging herself in the center of the living room, near the glass table, until Sisi [the domestic staff] brought a plastic bowl of water and a kitchen towel. The étagère had three shelves of delicate glass, and each one held beige ballet-dancing figurines.

Mama started at the lowest layer, polishing both the shelf and the figurines. (35)

Beatrice has been severely beaten, she has spent time in the hospital and she has lost a pregnancy. Yet, the very first thing she does when she returns is to attend to her tiny ornaments. She painstakingly goes through her usual ritual process of “figurine-polishing,” perhaps, in order to achieve some level of emotional healing to enable her function in the home. The figurines become an essential part of Beatrice’s existence which she must protect and clean daily as a form of escape. Thus, these ornaments become symbolic of her survival as a victim of extreme spousal violence and the daily cleansing ritual of these tiny beautiful ceramic figurines of ballet dancers also work to psychologically cleanse, sustain and help her achieve balance and heal. But the question remains to be resolved becomes, “is this the very best she could do under the circumstance she finds herself in order to alleviate her sufferings and those of her young children, Kambili and Jaja?” Ezeigbo avows that snail-sense feminism is all about “doggedness and ability to get round obstacles no matter how formidable the situation might be, by exercising effective skills and sensitive attitude (37). Beatrice doesn’t seem to have any real skill. Ezeigbo rightly points out that education is an indisputable tool of emancipation for the woman (29), but unlike her highly educated sister-in-law, Aunty Ifeoma, Beatrice has little or no education. Therefore, she discards Aunty Ifeoma advice as unworkable – mere “university talk” because she doesn’t believe she could survive on her own. It is then, surprising that it doesn’t seem to worry Beatrice that her husband does not treat her with any iota of respectability even in the presence of her young children and domestic staff. By this attitude, she is complicit in her own afflictions.

The idea of Beatrice’s complicity in her own afflictions is especially perceptible when her sister-in-law, Aunty Ifeoma, advises her to leave Eugene for good. Flustered at Aunty Ifeoma’s counsel, she rejects it as something unattainable – mere “university talk.” The implication of this rejection is a demonstration of the patriarchal ideals she has absorbed (consciously or otherwise) from her society. Her reply to Aunty Ifeoma’s suggestion comes across as the reaction of a woman who lacks the essence of Ezeigbo’s snail-sense strategy – she has no skills, lacks a sense of self-worth and she is not proactive. Beatrice has no positive plans or destination of her own. Definitely, a woman who has a goal or destination of her own does not ask helpless questions like these:

Where will I go if I leave Eugene’s house? Tell me, where will I go?” She did not wait for Aunty Ifeoma to respond. “Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying

a bride price?" "And so? I ask you – and so?" Aunty Ifeoma was shouting now.

Mama lowered herself to the floor. Obiora had spread a mat and there was room on it, but she sat on the bare cement, resting her head against the railings. "You have come again with your university talk, Ifeoma," she said, mildly, and then looked away to signal that the conversation was over. (245)

Beatrice appears clueless on where to go and what to make of her life if she moves out of her husband's residence. Her relationship with her husband, Eugene, her absolute dependency on him and her dehumanising lived-experience as a married woman clearly resonates with the idea of the woman as a "seemingly helpless being who is defined only through relationships to and with men" (Papke 34). Her proclivity for absolute dependence on her violent husband as well as her inability to defend or protect herself from his incessant batteries also seem to affirm and re-affirm the idea that the marginalised position of women in a typical domestic setting. This marginalisation is not only the product of a community's socio-cultural and religious norms but also a function of women's complicity in placing more value on males than themselves which amounts to self-tyranny as demonstrated by Beatrice. She may not necessarily have to be confrontational in her demand for basic human dignity and respect from her spouse. By firmly but gently putting measures such as insisting on a better treatment and a treat to report his battery to father Benedict may have succeeded in getting Eugene (her husband) appreciate her position as his wife, the mother of his children and head of his home. Her inability to resist violence and check her other unhelpful attitudes such as silence and passivity which normalise Eugene's torture in the home, also jeopardises her children's safety. Jaja had lost a finger from Eugene's beating. On the occasion he beats Kambili until she loses consciousness for being in possession of a painted portrait of Papa-Nnukwu (their grandfather), all Beatrice could do to save her child is whisper, "Please *biko*, please" (211). Thus, it appears she merely "watches helplessly as her husband inflicts injuries on her children in the name of discipline or love after which she nurses them" (Sotunsa 101). What is rather worrisome is that Beatrice seems to lack the conviction that she deserves to be accorded some honour in the home where she engages in the gritty fulltime unpaid labour of house-keeping and nurturing.

Beatrice's life is in the hands of her husband – he decides whether she lives or dies. Her sister-in-law, Aunty Ifeoma, makes effort to sensitise her to the danger looming ahead which she must not expose herself and her children to. Consequently, she counsels "[t]his cannot go on, nwunye m, [...]. When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head" (213). The incident he hits her belly (while she is pregnant) with the small table where

they keep their family bible is a close call with death. It is surprising that, for once, Beatrice never questions her husband's sanity, attempts to advise him seek professional help and, most importantly, find means of protecting herself and her children from his cruelties. Why would a mother risk being maimed or killed with her children by an obviously unwell (clinically stressed) husband and she sits idly in a mansion too afraid to speak out, negotiate or protect/defend herself and her young children? It is only while in Aunty Ifeoma's house she could find her voice and divulges lamely to her often bewildered daughter, Kambili:

You know that small table where we keep the family bible, *nne*? Your father broke it on my belly. She sounded as if she were talking about someone else, as if the table were not made of sturdy wood. 'My blood finished on the floor even could do to save it.' Mama shook her head slowly. A thin line of tears crawled down her cheeks... (248)

The small table is used specifically as a reverential place the family holy Bible (the Word of God) is kept. However, in this instance, Eugene has profanely used the hallowed table as an instrument of miscarriage which the Judeo-Christian religion he attempts to champion its doctrines, clearly designates as murder. He desecrates the place where the word of God is kept but nobody can hold him accountable because he is the "alpha and omega" of the entire Achike family and calls the shot as head of the family.

What, then, hurts or erodes the dignity of women as wives and mothers? What promotes female loss of dignity in the home? Women are economically disenfranchised both at the familial and societal levels which creates room for the position of the financially dependent woman. Over dependence on male partners erodes female dignity and reinforces gender inequality in the home and among other family relations. Aunty Ifeoma seems to recognise this degrading factor when, as a widow, she opts to go through difficulties with her children and refuses to yield to the control of Eugene as well as the relations of her late husband. Unlike Beatrice who feels insecure allows Eugene to control and mistreat her, Aunty Ifeoma chooses to ignore unnecessary socio-familial expectations and opinions. Her self-determining disposition gives her a sense of power – her own agency in a society dominated and influenced mostly by Catholics, traditionalists and as well as her immediate working environment which is the patriarchal university system that seek to subdue her. One way in which Aunty Ifeoma challenges gender inequality and oppression in *Purple Hibiscus* is her explicit rejection of prescriptive gender profiling. This is clearly perceptible in the manner she asserts her independence and rights as an individual distinct from her disadvantaged position as a widow and a single mother of three children. She, unapologetically, makes her stance clear as reminds Beatrice:

Have you forgotten that Eugene offered to buy me a car? [...] But first he wanted us to join the Knights of St. John. He wanted us to send Amaka to convent school. He even wanted me to stop wearing makeup! I want a new car, *nwunye m*, and I want to use my gas cooker again and I want a new freezer and I want money so that I will not have to unravel the seams of Chima's trousers when he outgrows them. But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things. (95)

Through the character of Aunty Ifeoma the author, no doubts, presents to the reader a portrait of the assertive female who refuses any kind of suffocation, self-inflicted or otherwise. She unflinchingly resists any kind of labelling, oppression and disrespect from her educational institution, her wealthy brother (Eugene), her late husband's family and even her very elderly father, Papa-Nnukwu. Aunty Ifeoma's sense of independence and tenacity of purpose remains unquestionable. The reader sees her strong character comes through when she insists that Kambili and Jaja should visit them at Nsukka. As Eugene refuses to allow his children to go with her and her children, her voice changed: "Eugene, let the children come with us! Aunty Ifeoma sounded irritated; her Voice was slightly raised. [. . .] Okay, they can go with you..." (77). Unlike Beatrice, Aunty Ifeoma is presented as strong female character. She is not a "Kneeling-down-woman" by any means. She stands on her feet and confronts her issues; she challenges the authorities in University of Nigeria Nsukka where she teaches, stands on her feet as she calls Eugene to order and makes efforts to speak sense into him, and stands on her feet as she makes change happen and seeks a better life for herself and her children in an American university. Widowhood may present a site for a sense of misery, defeatism and self-absorption, she rejects all these and successively holds her own both at the familial level (her own family and her late husband's family) and the institutional level (University of Nigeria). On the other hand, Beatrice remains immobilised by fear of her husband, Eugene - the fear which extreme violence engenders. Not even a triple of Eugene's brute force, control, and raw physical strength can move a strong female character such as Aunty Ifeoma, the truth is, like Beatrice, not many women are willing to put up resistance in order to free themselves from the indignities of gender oppressions in a typical familial setting.

By the end of the novel, the reader realises that things are far from "falling together" even after Eugene's death. Beatrice seems to have remained in a psychological kneeling-position where the reader meets here in the first chapter. The implication is that although she may have gotten rid of the source of her physical oppression (Eugene), however, she is yet to confront the reality of her self-inflicted sense of suffocation which must be resolved if she must

find her place of dignity in the world. Thus, although she has killed her oppressive husband, there is still much she has left unattended in her to-do-list. Beatrice must take a conscious decision to work on herself – emotionally, intellectually and psychologically. She must also retune her physical appearance so that she will not be mistaken as one of the lunatics at Ogbete market. So, the fact remains that while she has gotten rid of her oppressor, she still has the psychological aspect of that oppression to effectively deal with.

While Auntie Ifeoma seems to face the challenges associated with femaleness head-on and remains undaunted in her quest for emancipation, human dignity, respect and fairness. She fits the bill of the rugged Nigerian woman who is well-informed, proactive, sensitive, rugged and seeks self-improvement. This is unlike other mother characters such as Beatrice and Marcellina (*Oil Man of Obange*), who recurrently, find the same or similar challenges very engulfing. In her insightful essay, “Deconstruction of Gender Identities: A Study of the Novels of Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie,” Syed Hajira Begum recognises that by her courageous radical, yet, positive attitude, Auntie Ifeoma attempts to deconstruct patriarchy in the Achike family and suggests that matriarchy is just as potent as patriarchy. Thus, Begum insists that Auntie Ifeoma’s “reformist agenda is broad, as can [...] be observed at the University of Nsukka where she and her fellow lecturers go on strike demanding for changes in terms of salaries and promotions” (75). Although she suffers as a result of her reformist ideals which make the university authorities terminate her job, but Auntie Ifeoma is undeterred. She subsequently leaves for America where she secures another teaching appointment and also works in a pharmacy in order to earn enough money to maintain herself and the upkeep of her children.

Although Beatrice has confided in her already psychologically-suffocated and fragile daughter who could not help her in any meaningful way, she seems satisfied she has been able to let out the secret which she normally appears to shield her children from. But Auntie Ifeoma advises her to save her life and those of her children by walking away from the troubled marriage. Her only reaction becomes a series of questions which belie her poor sense of self-worth. She, thus, comes across as an individual who is unwilling and, probably, also unable to face a life independent of her husband – a woman of no importance. She counters Auntie Ifeoma’s advice to leave her husband by demanding, “Where would I go if I leave Eugene’s house? Tell me where would I go?” (250). Sadly, she fails to envision any place she could go to outside of Eugene’s house; she would be simply lost in the world without his financial/economic support.

Like Marcellina in Munonye’s *Oil Man of Obange* who is completely dependent on her husband, Jeri, financially, Beatrice’s total dependency on Eugene is debilitating and manifestly affects her children. The character of Beatrice seems to epitomise women as wives who live reactionary lives based on what

happens to them after marriage (the treatment they receive from their husbands) rather than live proactive lives based on what values they place on themselves. In this regard, Auntie Ifeoma is the exact opposite. Adichie seems to incorporate the character of the widow and single-mother of three children, Auntie Ifeoma, to condemn women's heavy economic and financial dependence on their husbands. By also show-casing the character of an enterprising and hardworking illiterate woman, Mama Bomboy in *Nsukka*, the author makes clear that even illiteracy is not a tenable excuse for passivity and overt spousal dependence. Evidently, in her narrative, Adichie deploys the distinct characters of the well-educated Auntie Ifeoma and her illiterate counterpart, Mama Bomboy, to challenge and reject the unnecessary sense of powerlessness demonstrated by Beatrice.

Thus, the character of Beatrice becomes emblematic of the stereotype of the enfeebled and suffocated female who not only yields to her husband's maltreatments but also indulges in self-tyranny which is, discernibly, borne out of internalised patriarchal ideals. Like the fascinating character of Firdaus, Nawal El Saadawi's female protagonist in *A Woman at Point Zero*, who kills the oppressive and violent pimp, Marzouk, with a knife in self-preservation, Beatrice takes the killing-option. She eventually murders her domineering, cruel and violent husband by poisoning his tea. But does that change her condition in any significant way? In a patriarchal marital relationship such as the one that Beatrice is yoked with, playing the role of a passive "good wife" in the face of violent oppression comes with a high psychological price tag of depression. It is, perhaps, in recognition of this detrimental tradeoff that Dedre Engelbrecht avows that at the end of the narrative, Beatrice "descends into madness and ultimately assumes the Gothic role of the psychologically disturbed female" (10).

Interestingly, in *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, the ancient Greek philosopher, Aristotle, examines the ends to which human conduct should be appropriately directed. In his epistemology, based on a careful observation of life and a genuine understanding of human nature, he rightly concludes that there is such a thing as injustice towards oneself (202). Thus, by consciously or unconsciously accepting an inferior labelling and its attendant poor treatments from their spouses, the two main mother characters in *Oil Man of Obange* and *Purple Hibiscus* indulge in self-tyranny which represents an injustice towards themselves particularly, and the female gender, generally. Hence, like their individual families and societies which categorise and suffocate them as inferior human species, Marcellina and Beatrice, evidently, acquiesce in their own relegations. They seem to have also looked through the same socio-familial window as their oppressors/victimisers and by their passive attitudes, affirm the general concession of female inferiority. Through silence, ignorance, passivity, ineptness, financial dependence and lack of negotiating skills, they appear to concur and say, "Yes, the males are right

– the culture of female inferiority is infallible, we must accept the status quo.” As a result, consciously or unconsciously, they progressively become active agents in the promotion of values which continue to relegate them. It is not surprising, then, that while the popular outcry against gender inequality goes on, the main mother characters in both novels continue to indulge in self-tyranny which ultimately makes them to become both the victimisers and the victimised. Thus, the complicit posture of females must be recognised and addressed if the conversation of gender equality and female suffocation must be pushed to a meaningful level.

Conclusion

A close examination of the two selected texts has provided insights into how the intersections of culturally sanctioned female-suffocation and self-tyranny (on the part of the female characters) have worked together to strip the two main mother characters of the vestiges of dignity. Self-tyranny which is borne out of women’s internalised patriarchal ideals is also identified as a key factor which has made female characters such as Marcellina Oko and Beatrice Achike to be complicit in their own degradations. Thus, they remain evocative of the archetypal hapless and vulnerable woman who feels lost without providing and protective man/husband. Regrettably, close to half a century after Munonye’s representation of the female as a suffocated gender as depicted through the characters of Marcellina and her daughter, Celia, in *Oil Man of Obange*, the narrative of female-suffocation remains largely unchanged in *Purple Hibiscus*. Adichie’s representation of female oppression within marital union and the complicit position of Beatrice in her own devaluation suggests that she faces even a grimmer oppressed-situation than Marcellina in *Oil Man of Obange*.

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