

Integrative Dynamics of Femalism in African Feminist Discourse

Chioma Opara*

Abstract

African feminism is as integrative as it is holistic and phenomenological. When the production of texts by anglophone female African writers commenced in the 1960s, critical works and theoretical formulations ensued. It became obvious that Western critics of African female texts did not fully appreciate the historical and socio-cultural environment that produced these works. Accordingly, African feminist theorists have made varied inputs in decentering and dismantling hegemonic Western postulations while accentuating the fabrics of African cosmology and world view. In this essay, the integrative dynamics of femalism, a hue of African feminist theory, will be explored in consonance with gynandrism. Tropes of female individuation such as the foot, womb, belly and breast will be underscored as transcendent body icons, denoting spirituality, vibrancy and nurturance. Spirituality will be deftly linked with Nudity in N/n principles which associate nakedness with social problems.

Keywords: Femalism, Nature, Transcendent, Icon, Nudity, Nakedness, Body, Decentering, Integration, Twisted Rib, Gynandrism, Spirituality

*Professor Chioma Carol Opara, PhD, Rivers State University, Port Harcourt, Nigeria. Contact: cachiom@yahoo.co.uk

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Introduction

The principles of African feminisms, for the most part, resonate with inclusiveness, deconstruction, and decentering of hegemonic institutions of patriarchy, and colonialism. The African feminist writer, theorist or critic unarguably contends with the realities of Western imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, globalization and patriarchy. African feminist criticism, which became visible in the 1970s in the wake of the publication of works by early African female writers such as Flora Nwapa received only a modicum of attention in the mainstream of African literary scholarship. Nevertheless, Nigerian literary critic Charles Nnolim has conceded that, "feminism in all its phases on the African literary scene ... has enriched African literature and given that literature a sense of balance" (1999: 54). Psalms Chinaka on his own part views African feminism as "an array of mostly female theorists upholding diverse approaches to feminism to negotiate gender equity." (2017: 1) The approaches are as diverse as they are integrative. In the Prolepsis of *Twelve Best Books by African Women* which celebrates a few canonized African women writers, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi observes that, "serendipitously shoring up the female literary terrain, the twelve texts are telling for their candor and encyclopedic coverage in three Africanized lingua francas (Arabic, English and French) that globalize women's conversations with the heterogeneous continent" (1996: 5). This show of recognition has undoubtedly given a boost to feminist literature, obviously marginalized by African male critics as well as critics from the West. Ritu Tyagi sums up this marginalization as "double colonization," as the postcolonial feminist "simultaneously experiences the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy." (2014: 45) There can be no doubt that the collaborative efforts of both writers and critics are moving this literature from the periphery.

This essay will present femalism as a meta-theory encompassing spirituality, nudity, biodiversity, twisted rib, and self-individuation. Literary texts will be employed in the application of this theory. Our discussion will also be woven with the wool of deconstruction and decentering. In foregrounding the female body which underlies this philosophy, tropes of female dynamism will be accentuated in the delineation of African female experience which differs markedly from that of Western women. A tenuous distinction will be made in N/n principles between Nudity and nakedness in the heuristic and phenomenological expositions, which accent the female as the stem and substratum of femalism as a praxis. Gynandrism or male empathy for African womanhood in African male literary texts will be dwelt upon in consonance with femalism.

The dialectics of African feminist theory revolve around negotiation, gender integration, and conciliatory strategies. It is important to note that African

feminist theory, which is predicated on African female experience and world view, is on a divergent path from Western feminist theory, due to historical as well as socio-cultural differences. Kemi Wale-Olaitan succinctly notes that some African female scholars have decided to modify feminism to suit the African worldview, creating African feminisms: African womanism, negofeminism, femalism, motherism and the like (2022: 51). Accordingly, African feminist theorists – Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Obioma Nnaemeka, Chioma Opara, Catherine Acholonu, Molaria Ogundipe, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, Marie Pauline Eboh, Ada Azodo, and others – have rejected certain aspects of the androgyny theory of Virginia Woolf, the existentialist theory of Simone de Beauvoir, the psychoanalytical theory of Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and other strands of Western feminist theory, for more Indigenous African formulations which cater to the socio-cultural needs of African women.

Ogunyemi's African womanism ideology is a departure from Alice Walker's womanism, and Clenora Hudson-Weems' "utopian" Africana womanism. Ogunyemi contends that African womanism is as rehabilitating as it is collaborative, including men and women across ethnic, religious, educational, geographical and military barriers (1996: 126). This all-inclusive philosophy envisions the total rehabilitation of a nation in spite of obvious differences. In her contribution to the debate, Obioma Nnaemeka bases her own postulate, negofeminism, on African cultural dynamics of negotiation and compromise. She posits that negofeminism is the feminism of negotiation and that negofeminism stands for no-ego feminism (2003: 377–378). The ego or *le moi*, which in the Lacanian model is formed in the imaginary phase – the stage of development when the child recognizes itself in the mirror – is subordinated to the strategic negotiation with and around patriarchy. The Lacanian perceived image of self defers to the compromising as well as strategic negotiation with patriarchy. Nnaemeka underlines the uniqueness of African feminism which resides in its cultural and ideological focus.

Another philosophy based on an African indigenous model is Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism which also stresses negotiation or dialogue (*nkolika*) with men. She, nonetheless, stresses individualism in this strand which she refers to as "situated feminism" (Ezeigbo 2012: 35).

Socialist/feminist critic Molaria Ogundipe Leslie also reckons with indigenous feminism. Her coinage STIWANISM is an acronym for social transformation including women in Africa. Ogundipe has, nevertheless, taken a contradictory position regarding the accommodation of patriarchy. In her own words:

“Womanism is not feminism; feminism is a theoretical position that demands social and political change especially political, in gender relations in society with emphasis on the establishment of basic human rights for women; it is not an ‘accommodation’ of patriarchy and the status quo as womanism seems to be” (Ogundipe 2013: xv).

Ogundipe could as well be addressing every other African feminist theory since practically every strand of African feminism underlines accommodation as a factor of integration. In the vein of Ama Ata Aidoo (1992), she urges every man and woman to become an active feminist.

Marie Pauline Eboh, on her own part, frowns upon the etymological composition of feminism and coins gynism which is bereft of any masculine root or affix. As she puts it, “for gynism, the woman question is a complex problem, and it is beyond feminism. Gynists seek liberation not only from male domination, but also from foreign rule and neo-colonialism” (Eboh 2002: 31). In consonance with gynism, the other strands of African feminism such as African womanism, Stiwanism, femalism, and di-feminism essentially seek the autonomy of the African nation alongside that of womanhood.

Femalism is a viable addition to the discursive as well as scintillating theoretical debate in the vast and fertile terrain of African feminisms. In the vein of gynism, it recognizes the affinity between the peculiar African woman question and the festering African condition. The quadruple oppression of the African woman by patriarchy, class, colonialism, and race is analogous to a diminished African nation, patently vitiated by the harrowing experiences of slavery, Western imperialism, colonialism, post-colonialism, and underdevelopment. The aftermath of such a colonial situation is the manifestation of confusion and low self-esteem by psychologically battered African men. These men ultimately repress their women in a bid to compensate their own “inferiority complex”. This would appear to be congruent with Frantz Fanon’s thoughts on the psychological effects of colonialism on the confounded colonized subject, wherein alienation is the function of psychological mechanisms of colonization (Fanon 1967). Femalism recognizes the fact that both the African woman and man are victims of colonial oppression. Evidence abounds that in the pre-colonial era African women enjoyed ample space and authority which were eroded by Westernization and imported religions such as Christianity which prescribe female docility as well as passivity. African women of the precolonial days were as strong as they were dignified in the laudable roles they played in society as nurturers, traders, healers, farmers, and mothers.

In its endorsement of mothering, femalism foregrounds the female body which is likened to Mother Earth as a matrix of nurturance and creativity. In feminist literature, signs and gestures may be used as indices of patterned female communication behavior in the underscoring of the female body. These include the express knotting of the female wrapper in defiance or readiness to engage in a fight; the folding of a woman's arms under her breasts in trepidation or under tragic circumstances. The breasts just like the womb, and female genital organs are vital female tropes underlining the feminist philosophy of productivity, nurturance, and breeding. Likewise, other body parts such as the leg, eye, belly, back, and neck are employed as potent weapons of deconstruction of blatant patriarchal imprisonment of female bodies as stereotypes. The leg, for instance, in the feminist theoretical model stands for the figure of an assertive woman, moving around in the relentless quest for self-fulfillment.

Femalism as an ideology, as I have said elsewhere, goes beyond motherism's explicit idealism; African womanism's tenets of four C's (conciliation, collaboration, consensus, complementarity); nego-feminism's ingenious negotiation and gynism's occlusion of the male root. Rather, it strives to blend and absorb some wholesome concepts as organizing principles. As a humanistic philosophy, it embraces the biodiversity conception of ecofeminism and the attendant conflation of nature, love, spirituality, justice and equity (Opara 2004: 29) Not only is the violation of woman linked to that of the environment, the quest for the freedom of the African woman and man is closely associated with that of the entire African nation. Columbus Ogbujah sees this peculiar African female question as the feminist concerns for women and the growth of the African continent. In his own words, the feminist "style is conciliatory and collaborative, and its strategy is to emancipate women through the wholesome and holistic liberation of the African male still ensconced in the conflictive terrain of colonial objectification." (Ogbujah 2022: 42) The feminist discourse which is in the precinct of postcolonial feminist debate subtly integrates the female body in its political struggles.

The Female Being and the Nurturant Body

It would appear that the human body lies at the center of gender politics. The Judeo-Christian creation myth claims that woman is the offshoot of a man's rib. Nuruddin Farah alludes to a Somali proverb preceding the prologue of his novel, *From a Crooked Rib* which is that, "God created woman from a crooked rib; and anyone who trieth to straighten it, breaketh it" (1982: n.p.). Biological essentialism glibly relegates woman to the compartment of the weaker sex; a

mass of flesh infused with nature-related oestrogen and bereft of the “vital” testosterone. Simone de Beauvoir rhetorically identifies this problem in her contention that,

“The term ‘female’ is derogatory not because it emphasizes woman’s animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex and if this sex seems to man to be contemptible and inimical even in harmless dumb animals, it is evidently because of the uneasy hostility stirred up in him by women. Nevertheless, he wishes to find in biology a justification for this sentiment” (Beauvoir 1974: 3).

Gender and sex are viewed by feminists as distinct factors of cultural schema which stem from blatant sexism that relegates woman to a sub-category status. Sandra Lipsitz Bem in her incisive exposition of lenses of gender on society, identifies the three lenses of gender polarization, androcentrism or male-centeredness, and biological essentialism. She asserts that biological essentialism “rationalizes and legitimizes both other lenses by treating them as the natural and inevitable consequences of the intrinsic biological natures of women and men.” (Bem 1993: 2) Evidently subordinated to male, female connotes imperfection, weakness, frailty, and nature in a male dominated, sexist culture.¹ The Igbo appellation *Nwanyibuife* (womanhood is essential)² connotes a rude awakening to contrary, and positive views of womanhood based on its ontological indices.

May it be reiterated that female, the antonym of male, is synonymous but not identical to feminine. The synonym is encapsulated in Catharine Mackinnon’s observation that, “socially, femaleness means femininity which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms” (1982: 16-17). Perhaps Mackinnon’s view is driven by Freud’s male activity and female passivity dichotomy which obviously hinges on sexuality. Freud links the libido with the masculine and hysteria with the feminine (Mitchell 1915: 46-48). Since femininity is socially constructed and male-directed, it evokes sexuality, sex appeal, and connotes vulnerability to men. Femaleness, on its own part, underscores the female as an entity, an autonomous being. Unlike femininity which panders to biological determinism, femaleness

¹ African cultural norms are in the main male-centered and pander to the exaltation of maleness, and the attendant denigration of femaleness. Accordingly, in most parts of Africa, male children are valued higher than female offspring.

² For an extended discussion of the gender philosophy embedded in this Igbo appellation see Kalu’s chapter “Nwanyibuife: Women and the Social Construction of Gender in African Development” in Kalu 2020, 75-94.

undersets what it takes to be a quintessential, fulfilled woman as a subject. Differently stated, it is that distinct ability to stand out as a woman and stand up for the woman essence. Femaleness here is understood as the unique composition of the “woman being” with regard to her strength, spirituality, and intuitiveness which consist in her vital essence. These are the stellar attributes of the quintessential African woman who relentlessly strives to tower above myriad cultural clogs as a distinct subject rather than a passive object of patriarchy. It is vital to note that a female may not necessarily be feminine. These ontological and etymological attributes of the female as a stem or root inform the coinage femalism.

As an existing being, the African female strives to survive and transcend in an African cosmology beset by sexist customs such as leviratic marriages, inhuman widowhood practices, female genital mutilation of the girl child and “bottom-power” (perceived female sexual gratification in exchange for favors from men) biases. Assertive African women have essentially grappled with these cultural clogs in consonance with a femalist philosophy that advocates transcendence which effects the freedom of woman. For Sartre, human consciousness or nothingness (*néant*) is diametrically opposed to thingness (*être*). Freedom is thus a “gratuitous activity” and a palpable vehicle for human struggle. Existentialist tenets exhort action in one part and abhor passivity in another. For Simone de Beauvoir who was appreciably influenced by Sartre, transcendence consists in the freedom to engage in freely chosen projects while immanence connotes passivity and inertia (Beauvoir 1974: xxxiii). The vital facets of transcendence are crystallized in choice, action, freedom, and consciousness. Beauvoir’s concept of motherhood, however, differs markedly from that of most African feminists. While Beauvoir affirms that motherhood reduces woman to the animal nature of *en-soi*, many an African woman transcends in her choice to be a mother. Accordingly, motherhood falls within her chosen projects in nurturance. Similarly, a creative and productive woman who does not have children is also placed in a similar mold of transcendence as an artist.³ The African conception of transcendence thus resides in the conflation of nature, nurture, and creativity. It is against this background of polemics hinged on biology and sexual politics that femalism expressly underscores the noble aspects of productivity, nurturance, and reproduction. In the same vein, the production of female texts and other forms of creativity are metaphorically considered as mothering. The choice to become a mother from both literal and metaphorical perspectives is seen as a personal

³ Within the femalist ideology, a childless female artist who has produced some works is considered as fertile and productive as a mother of children.

decision in the expression of transcendence. This is viewed as a lucid articulation of freedom.

By virtue of its analysis of living experiences focused on the body, femalism is as phenomenological as it is heuristic and composite. Drawing parallels between the politically scarred as well as scrambled African nation and the socio-culturally battered female body, femalism effects a nexus between the freedom of woman, man and that of the African continent. The female nurturing body is deemed to be analogous to Mother Africa, an embodiment of Mothering Nature. The metropolitan manipulations of a jolted African nation in the course of its economic, political and historical trajectory are likened to the flagrant, patriarchal abuse of the female body. Closely related to the female body are the dynamics of nakedness and Nudity.

N/n Principles of Nudity and Nakedness

N/n principles is a feminist formulation which derives from the sociologist's distinction between nakedness and nudity. In the words of Ali Mazrui, "[s]ociologists have distinguished between nudity, which is a natural state without clothes, and nakedness which is the state of being undressed. The latter often has sexual suggestion implying focus on the vital organs." (1980: 58) Accordingly, Nudity in the feminist ideology is located within the realm of the pristine and the spiritual while nakedness is inextricably linked with moral aberrations and other social vices. The nuances of Nudity and nakedness are thus interrogated in the feminist tenets. Is the irate African woman in the quest of freedom and social regeneration Nude or naked?

Nakedness has always been effectively employed as a political strategy in grassroots African feminism. A naked African woman is deemed a lurid missile hurled to blind a deplorable male eye. Essentially, women in African societies would strip themselves naked to make a socio-political statement in moments of protest. Female nakedness which is expressly radical could constitute a viable tool of transcendence in femalism. In her naked form, shorn of sensuality, the defiant female assumes the stature of a masquerade, a masked spirit, driven by rebellious madness to dismantle patriarchal structures. Essentially, this outrageous behavior which departs from the norm is radicalism to the hilt. In their capacity as metaphors of identification and evaluation, nakedness denotes a problem and Nudity a solution (Opara 2016: 64). A source of biological imagery in women's writing, nakedness underscores the objectification and exploitation of woman.

Nudity, in turn, denotes some facets of spirituality in the feminist ideology. In the spiraling spin of a spiritual web, the spirit, body and mind are bared in climactic nudity, underpinning the natural, the ingenuous and the raw. Nudity would find a convenient slot in Rebeka Njau's spiritual space in *The Sacred Seed* (2003). Nudity is synonymous with nature and probity, while nakedness tends to connote aggression or violence. A mad man or woman is glaringly naked. Adam and Eve were evidently Nude in pre-lapsarian Eden but discovered nakedness in the wake of eating the forbidden fruit. Nudity thus evokes not only the idyllic atmosphere of a utopian world but also the natural, pastoral and pristine pre-colonial Africa. Nudity is, in effect, dramatized in the pre-colonial milieu in Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1994) where four strong women with capacious memory lay bare their hearts and minds, as they tell the stories of their lives with no holds barred. Nakedness conversely applies to the post-lapsarian state of man in dystopia or, more specifically, the piteous state of an anomic African continent struggling with corruption, underdevelopment, and poverty. The two hearts described by Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Devil on the Cross* belong to these two categories. According to Ngugi, "Therefore there are two hearts; the heart built by the clan of parasites, the evil heart and the heart built by the clan of producers the good heart" (1980: 53-54). The good heart could be located in the realm of Nudity, while the evil heart belongs with nakedness.

As society evolves from precolonial Nudity to postcolonial nakedness, woman strips, exposing her body to make a valid point concerning social vices, inequity and injustice. Women cast off their clothes, for instance, when they feel they have been brazenly mistreated. The stripping of women in the public space is a bold statement on nakedness emblemizing a corrupt or retrogressive society steered by leaders with evil hearts. The naked dance of women in Tess Onwueme's *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988), referred to by Felly Moh, constitutes the semiotics of protest and revolt against impunity. Moh notes that, "The naked dance is a last resort which women have tried over the ages to show complete disgust and disapprobation. The men witnessing this show of shame, retreat subdued and stupefied beyond words" (1999: 63-64). This is analogous to bearding the lion in his den. Such a deliberately provocative body language may under very trying circumstances even degenerate into the baring of parted buttocks (*ikpe otula*). This is unarguably the climax of women's protest in stark nakedness. It is obviously in a concerted effort to discomfit patriarchy that women take such a drastic action. In Magdalen Ogundu's *Mbobi when nto iban* (first daughters) in the village threaten to march around the town stark naked in protest against female genital mutilation, a number of men are forced to depart from the village in order to avoid the confrontation. The proponent of tradition, Chief Effiong,

takes a very drastic step by firing some lethal shots at the crowd in the village square. He rationalizes his action thus: "I will not live to see them [*nto iban*] deface my culture, if they carry out their threat, we, I mean the men in this village will be as good as dead" (Ogundu 2012: 59). The potency of female nakedness cannot be glossed over. Female nakedness is thus as debilitating and destructive as Nudity is innocuous, creative, and therapeutic in the feminist philosophy.

Nudity rather than nakedness thrives in women's exodus community of creativity, healing, and self-development in Njau's *The Sacred Seed* (2003). The eponymous heroine of Veronique Tadjou's *Queen Pokou* (2009) tore off her wrapper, revealing her "blinding nudity" in the course of sacrificing her son to save her people. This heroic and selfless act which attracts an upper case 'N' is as mythological as it is spiritual. Conversely, in Mariama Ba's *Un chant écarlate* (1979) (*Scarlet Song*) Mireille in a fit of fury, casts off her clothes, slaughters her son and attacks her unfaithful husband. She is, obviously in a state of nakedness with a lower case 'n' as she embarks on the quest for individuation.

Female (S)Pace, Spirituality, and Individuation

The African female self is unarguably silhouetted against a geographical mass of beleaguered men and women in a multi-layered space that Chinyere Okafor refers to with the Igbo concept *uwa umunwanyị* (women's world), a subculture of the wider space "*uwa aja*" (world of sand) which both men and women inhabit. According to Okafor, *uwa umunwanyị* encodes separateness and otherness on the horizontal level of equivalence, but on the vertical gradation in which women occupy the lower land and the spherical in which they occupy the margins it defines lack of power, marginality and unfairness (Okafor 1999: 61). Differently put, the female space is invariably subordinated and placed on the margin by a hidebound male-centered patriarchal culture. Much as such a female space culturally connotes relegation, it ironically provides a therapeutic forum for female assertion, negotiation, diplomacy and various political strategies. Clearly, the female sub-culture depicts some all-women Igbo cultural events such as widowhood rites, celebration of birth (*omugwo*) and even kolanut ceremony which is a putative male tradition. The metonyms of femaleness are flaunted in the *omugwo* ceremony. Bawdy birth songs are chanted while accentuating female reproductive organs. These are punctuated with the semiotics of *omumu* (creativity in birthing) in consonance with the dynamics of femalism. Chinyere Okafor has defined *omumu* as:

“the principle of fecundity, begetting and creativity. It is a life-caring essence that is also associated with the earth goddess concept. The ideology derives from gynecology and connects with diverse ideas evoked by the presence, being, sexuality, performance and function of a female person and mother-being. It permeates social psychology and inspires human action. It is the most important principle because of its function, its continuity, nurturing, birth and death rites” (Okafor 2012: 13).

It is my modest submission that the body language of *omumu* in the feminist ideology includes the folding of arms across the breasts in moments of sorrow and despondency; the placing of hands on the hips in dire straits or in challenging moments; the tightening or knotting of the female covering or wrapper in a belligerent mood. The feminist Ezeigbo dramatizes a woman’s body language shortly after a tragedy in *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1994). In the wake of the baring of Abazu’s secret by Onyekozuru, the irate Abazu shoots her for her betrayal. The bearer of the bad news, the sure footed Olanwa clutches her two breasts as she runs like a gazelle. Symbolically, the life-giving breasts which connote nudity are diametrically opposed to the forces of destruction and violence.

It is against these destructive forces that Kenyan female writer, Rebeka Njau, in the spirit of femalism, launches her missiles. In an attempt to escape from the forces of destruction symptomatic of a battered and fetid African landscape, she creates in *The Sacred Seed* (2003) an illuminating spiritual haven upheld by an enigmatic female healer, priestess, and potter. Charlene Spretnak contends that,

“women’s spirituality which is the oldest spiritual tradition on earth, provides women the ability to heal themselves and one another psychically and physically thereby enhancing women’s culture. Rituals created within this framework differ markedly from patriarchal observances and intuitive healing, strengthening, creative energy and spontaneity form a meaningful core of values.” (1982: 394-395).

In line with Spretnak’s thoughts, Njau delves into creativity, dreams, meditation and mythology while foregrounding a female subculture underset with love and integration. This “biotic community” creates a sanctuary for women in a transcendent grove which tallies with what Mary Daly refers to as an exodus community. Daly contends that this community is not like the church or “sacred canopy” which tends to become a place for “spinning webs of counterfeit

transcendence," or freedom which is not attained through probity (1982: 351). The exodus community rather provides a space, a journey to individualization and participation leaving behind the false self and sexist society (ibid.: 353). In this feminist allegory, a dynamic space which does not shut out flora, fauna and men, revitalizes women on their healing journey. This is in consonance with the feminist ideology of integration and holistic accommodation.

When women try to go back to the origins, the utopia that preceded the prevalent dystopia – as is documented in *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1994), they resonate with the resilience and dynamism that characterized the women in the pristine African milieu. This is the case in women's space of Nudity where women wistfully try to re-enact their existence by varied expressions of creativity, nurturance, healing, and spirituality.

Female spirituality, antonymous with male religiosity, does not thrive only in biotic and exodus communities. Flora Nwapa, impelled by the feminist ideology that foregrounds spirituality, imbues some of her female figures with extra-sensory perspicacity, a metaphysical bulwark of self-preservation, assertion and healing in a hostile and violent world. She refers to such numinous insight in her short story "The Loss of Eze" in *This is Lagos* as "a mighty bull, you couldn't even seize it by its horns. The horns were too many and too dangerous to come near to" (Nwapa 1979: 82). Nwapa's collections of short stories *This is Lagos* and *Wives at War* are full of sibylline, intuitive, and discerning female characters. The arcane and sensuous battlements for women in *Wives at War* are not in the least Amazon-like. They are rather guided by what Buchi Emecheta continually alludes to in her autobiographical novel *Second Class Citizen* (1983) as the Presence, the Image which constituted the strong force that propelled her in her early life's struggles. The spiritual battlements present themselves in intuition, discernment, prediction, oracular sapience, and dreams. Nwapa crystallizes female spirituality in the pervading presence of the goddess of the lake in her early novels. Female spirituality is inextricably linked with healing, creativity, and nudity. These are the basic components of feminism.

Transcendent Icons in the Female Quest

In the quest for transcendence which is underpinned with freedom, woman may, as a matter of course, assume a radical posture. Nnolim has berated some African female writers such as Nawal el Saadawi, Mariama Ba, and Flora Nwapa for condoning some immoral behavior as well as coldblooded murder which he views as attacking the symptoms rather than the disease (Nnolim 1999: 50-54). I have dubbed such female characters who seek transcendence at all costs,

employing violence, promiscuity or nakedness “twisted ribs”, for their radical departure from African traditional patterns. The twisted rib is totally out of shape and more distorted than the crooked rib which is formulated in Judeo-Christian debates and manipulated by culture in gender construction. The twisted rib is not in the least depraved, indolent or passive. The twisted rib is that defiant, assertive, strong, resilient, and visionary woman in feminist texts who foregrounds her body as an emblem of positive resistance against sexism and cultural oppression. She dwells in the corrupt, anomic, postcolonial African society which subordinates integrity and forthrightness to political pragmatism.

Feminist writers Nawal el Saadawi and Tsitsi Dangarembga, in their capacity as medical doctors as well as psychologists/psychoanalysts, have deftly depicted twisted ribs in defiance of their patriarchal and sexist cultures. In the portrayal of these aggressive women, the aftermath of colonization/alienation and the attendant ambivalence of the female mind as well as body are graphically bared. In the complex fission of Tambu’s body in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and that of Bahiah Shaheen in Saadawi’s *Two Women in One* (1985), there is a lucid reflection of a “maddened double” embodied in the restive and dynamic female protagonist relentlessly yearning for freedom.

The socio-cultural experience of the African woman revolves around mothering and peace making within the confines of the home and also in the wider society, even in war situations. Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo dramatizes this thought in her mother-centered collection of short stories *Rituals and Departures* (1996). In the short story, “A Day to Remember,” a glaringly graphic picture is painted of a very assertive expectant mother, flaunting her body as a measure of freedom. “She [Meenwa] pressed her left hand against her heaving breasts and the other hand rested lightly on the tip of her rotund belly - she was very pregnant and her stomach, pushed in front of her like an over-blown balloon” (Ezeigbo 1996: 97-98). The “rotund belly”, which connotes nature, in the short story is equated with rather than subordinated to her independent mind – an emblem of culture. There is a melding of nature and culture which are usually polarized on the essentialist list of Manichean or binary oppositions evidenced in Western feminism. Again, the child-laden womb which is an index of transcendence is employed by Ezeigbo as a potent metaphor in her historical novel *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1994). There were womb-like murals in Obiatu’s large obi, “probably symbols of fertility” (Ezeigbo 1994: 11). Besides, the chosen griottes, the voice of the women, Oluada, were endowed with womb-wise, clear, and uncluttered memory, which served as the repertoire for a people’s checkered history, recorded in bottomless memory.

The leg/foot is, in the same vein, used as a trope of female identification in feminist texts. In Zaynab Alkali's early novels, *The Stillborn* (1985), and *The Virtuous Woman* (1987), the foot serves as a synecdoche for the itinerant woman on a quest for freedom.⁴ Alkali's novels are set in Northern Nigeria where women are visibly marginalized as well as repressed by Islamic culture. The import of this trope cannot be glossed over. In 1988, Mallam Shehu Garba Kiruwa, a forty-year-old cattle Fulani, in Sokoto, Northern Nigeria hacked off the right leg of his twelve-year old run-away wife Hauwa. Shehu claimed he was provoked by her "act of insubordination" to strike the six fatal blows. Getting rid of a woman's leg is tantamount to truncating her sense of well-being and relegating her to the mold of morbid inertia. Again, traditionally, robust and sturdy legs are recommended for viable motherhood.

The feminist Ama Ata Aidoo iconoclastically proffers an alternative for female independence. She deconstructs the cultural standard of female strength in childbearing. Aidoo's thin or spindly legs in the title story, "The Girl Who Can" do not, in the least, conform to the ideal woman's body with respect to female strength (Aidoo 2002). Her "defective" limbs, ironically propel her to an astounding visibility as a sprinter on the tracks, and fields. Aidoo thus subverts traditional expectations of how a woman's body should be. Saadawi, on her own part, projects the foot as a potent female armament in *Two Women in One* (1985). The female protagonist, Bahiah Shaheen, stamps her feet hard on the ground at the least provocation. Her strong feet are in sharp contrast with the bound foot of "Golden Lotus"⁵ and also the wobbly, shuffling feet of the timid girls in her class. She also gazes at patriarchy with her black upturned piercing eyes which recall Tambu's "chameleon" eyes in *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Taking a vantage position, these women apparently peer at Bem's gender lenses as they subvert Luce Irigaray's specular logic by being the subject rather than the object of the gaze. Another reversal is that of the Lacanian symbolic order. If it is the phallus that prevails in the law of the father signifying the symbolic order, Saadawi inverts this thesis in the male space in the course of a bodily dissection during an anatomy class. A wrinkled penis which looked like old excrement was bared (1985: 17). In diminishing the male organ in a reductive imagery, the image of robust femaleness is conversely reconstructed using viable body parts to project

⁴ In Alkali's two novels set in a patriarchal Muslim culture that hardly encourages female education, the author employs the journey motif, and the female characters move around as they set out to acquire formal education.

⁵ The bound foot or golden lotus is associated with Chinese erotica. A woman's feet were bound to give her male partner sexual pleasures.

the dynamics of African womanhood in her peculiar spiritual space where Nudity is prevalent.

Finally, it would appear that the dynamics of femalism are shored up by the spirit of gynandrism or male empathy for female subjects in African male texts. This is undoubtedly a boost in African literary criticism, as well as an act of advocacy for femalism. Apparently toeing the line of 19th century British philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill who was committed to the suffrage movement, gynandrists such as Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Niyi Osundare, Isidore Okpewho, Elechi Amadi, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Festus Iyayi have unequivocally censured sexist cultural patterns and attitudes. Gynandrists would rather create extenuating circumstances for their erring female protagonists than vilify them in the mode of sexist male authors. Ngugi and Sembene have also cast prostitutes as heroines of their epic novels. They also use femalist tropes in their texts. Sembene's tragic heroine, Ngone wa Thiandum in *Vehi-Ciosane* (1972) raises and disengages her foot from her husband's leg as a gesture of protest for being a victim of a vicious environment that bred an incestuous husband. She finally commits suicide as a measure of freedom.

Signifying on the spiritual facet of femalism, both Armah and Sembene employ Sophocle's Teiresian vision through their blind sibylline female figures who are endowed with tremendous visions. The spiritual capabilities of Naana in Armah's *Fragments* recall those of blind Maimouna in Sembene's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu* (1970). In the vein of the legendary Goumba N. Diaye, Maimouna measures her strength against that of men. Armed with ample perspicacity and discernment, she wonders why men with eyes cannot really see. Some measure of gender integration in the quest is thus achieved by this symbiotic critical mode of enquiry.

Conclusion

Our discussion has articulated the holistic, conciliatory and integrative elements of femalism which embraces N/n principles, nature, creativity, spirituality and national development as a praxis in consonance with gynandrism. This portman-teau approach testifies to the peculiarity of African feminism which cannot isolate female experience from national issues. The female body which is an embodiment of an ailing as well as ravaged nation takes center stage in this philosophy. Transcendent corporeal icons such as the breast, belly, leg, eye, and foot have been underscored in the analysis of some male and female African texts. Indeed, practically every relevant and dynamic female body part has been highlighted in different debates in African feminism. Consider, for example, the

balancing of the load on the head in Davies and Adams' *Ngambika* (1986); the identification of the six mountains on the back in Ogundice's *Recreating Ourselves* (1994); the concern over the stress-related problems on the neck in Chimamanda Adichie's title story in *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009). The African woman's body coupled with spirituality, underset with Nudity, accordingly tells a story that cannot be complete without making any reference to the male gender and the nation's history. Complementarity therefore extends beyond gender to national integration hinged on spiritual, and material integrity.

The stark reality is, to borrow Buchi Emecheta's dictum, "We need our men" even if they embody patriarchy. Experience has taught the African woman that transcendence is a function of accommodation as well as integration. Therein lies the strategic alliance between femalism and gynandrisms in the quest for both personal and national freedom. Not only are alliances sought in the perennial quest, but stifling clothes are cast off in repudiation of some repressive aspects of society, and ribs are twisted in utter defiance of hegemonic structures.

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