

# African Feminist Writers' Creation of Powerful Voices through Female Characters' Silence

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## Abstract

Transformative discourses in academia expose the increase in internal violence and aggression by men against women in African societies. The survival of African women and their children requires many strategies and there is always a limit to human patience, and endurance in the struggle for survival. Survival has been the driving force that compels African women to take drastic decisions to free themselves from violence and psychological trauma caused by colonialism in most parts of the African continent. Through African feminism, silence, and decolonial theories, this study explores African feminist writers' conceptualization of modern women in their works and their weapons for social discourse on African women and opposing the patriarchal powers that have marginalized them. The knowledge and appreciation of Africans' cultural heritage has provided African feminist writers with the tools to articulate Indigenous feminist theories. This article aims to show how African feminist writers reconstruct the image of women through the creation of radical female characters who speak out for women's rights as well as those who are powerful in their silence to affirm that even those who are mute always speak. The article also highlights the significance of Indigenous African feminist theories in promoting innovative research and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Violence against Women, African Feminism, Decolonization and Social Transformation

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## Introduction

In postcolonial Africa, gender inequalities have existed in every sphere of human relations (Mama 1997). These inequalities indicate a general lower status for women in society. In facing oppressive systems, i.e., norms, practices, and beliefs of female subordination, African women strive to assert themselves. The struggle for gender equality leads to various forms of gender conflict. Traditionally, these gender conflicts have been pronounced more in marriages or family relationships. As women struggle to liberate themselves from the oppression of culture and tradition, colonization brought with it foreign religious practices that further exacerbated gender imbalances. The Christian Bible instructs that “Women should obey their husbands in all things” (Ephesians 5: 21-24). It also orders that a woman shall be ruled by her husband, “in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children, and thy desires be to thy husband and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3: 6). The Qur’an supports domestic violence, “As to those women on whose part you get loyalty and ill conduct, admonish them, refuse to share their beds, beat them (lightly) ...” (Surah 4: 34-35). Women refuse to stand back and accept cultural and religious practices that try to perpetually subjugate them. They continue in their struggle for self-assertion, self-worth, and self-actualization. This study examines African feminist writers' portrayal of the patriarchal oppressive roles of men, tradition, and religion used in shaping women's conditions in postcolonial African societies. They have created female characters in their novels who speak vocally against patriarchal oppression as well as representations of silenced women. In this article, focus is on how female characters who are initially mute develop into fearless protagonists in the works of Nawal El Saadawi and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

## Theoretical Framework

Indigenous African feminist theories aligned with decolonization and silence theories are used to analyse the texts selected for this article. African feminism has helped African writers to reinvent the image of African women who display effective survival strategies in the pursuit of women's interests in postcolonial Africa. Through Indigenous African feminist theories, this article examines the sensibilities of feminist writers from different parts of Africa and their approaches to the advancement of women and gender justice in Africa. It analyses the novels against the backdrop of the decolonization of gender relations and the struggle against patriarchal powers in Africa; and considers how they imagine liberated futures for African women.

In this article, African feminist theories are also used to expose the colonizing impact of some Christian and Islamic religious dogmas on Indigenous beliefs, cultural practices, and behavioural codes, especially in relation to women's sexuality, submissiveness, independence and empowerment, reproductive and health issues, among others. They are also used to address the impact of some foreign cultures on women's psychology, and the increase in violence against women in Africa.

The dynamics of the understanding the role of silence in the Egyptian writer, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983) and *Two Women in One* (1985), and the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006) are enhanced by the "spiral of silence theory," a theory of social communication developed by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, a German political scientist. In the 1960s, she studied the willingness of individuals to express their personal opinions and how people express their views through their body language and the verbal feedback they receive from other members of their society. She found out that people's expression of opinion is encouraged or inhibited by the reaction of others. Noelle-Neumann defines the "spiral of silence" as the process persons experience when "they may find that the views [they] hold[s] are losing ground; the more this appears to be so, the more uncertain [they] will become of [themselves], and the less [they] will be inclined to express [their] opinion" (Noelle-Neumann 1984: 11). Bowen and Blackmon (2003) assert that the opinion of the majority has a controlling effect on an individual's decision to speak out for fear of isolation. This article traces, through literary works, how the psychological and sociological condition of oppressed women causes them to remain in fear or silence on issues that affect their lives, and how these works create ways for them to free themselves from the shackles of socially induced fear, when they can no longer bear the pain of dying in silence. They usually take suicidal decisions or become murderous in their actions.

El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and *Two Women in One* and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* are examples in which muted women turn into murderers. This article highlights the authors' reconstruction of the image of women through the creation of radical female characters who speak powerfully in silence; to reaffirm that it is very dangerous for any society to experience the unapologetic dissent of the mute. In the selected texts, female characters who are assertive and recognize their self-worth decolonize their minds from religious doctrines, and practices that degrade women.

## Indigenous African Feminist Theories and Transforming Female Literary Voices

African feminism has been defined by feminist theorists and scholars to capture the experiences of African women that have been ignored by Western feminism. This gave rise to variants of Indigenous feminist theories. Defining African feminism based on their motives of propounding these theories, Akachi T. Ezeigbo asserts that “these theorists choose to articulate their own ideas of feminist concepts that are suitable to discuss the needs and experiences of women in Africa’s indigenous cultures” (2012: 19). Iwuchukwu (2019: 79) also emphasizes that the reason for the ongoing emergence of new variants of feminism is mainly because of dissatisfaction with the existing ones.

By reinventing the image of women through their survival strategies, African feminist writers address women-related problems in literary works with a view to solve gender injustice and to empower women. Through their literary works, they emphasize female characters’ attitudinal changes towards cultural elements and traditions that degrade women to buttress the need for self-assertion and self-actualization as precondition for the emancipation of women. They create female characters that speak out not through words but action and do not end in a silence that can be understood as consent.

In *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker suggests ‘Womanism’ as an inclusive variant of feminism, emphasizing Womanism as a commitment to the “survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (1983: xi). She coined the term with reference to the Black folks’ expression of mothers to female children ‘You acting womanish’, referring to “outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behaviour” (Walker 1983: xi). Furthermore, Walker builds womanism on the idea of emotional bonding between women inclusive of sexual diversity, defining womanist as “[a] woman who loves other women, sexually and/or non-sexually” (Walker 1983: xi).

The Nigerian literary scholar Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi proposes African Womanism that insists on meaningful collaboration between Black men and Black women and asserts that “[f]reedom and independence of women [...] wants meaningful union between Black women, Black men and Black children and will see to it that men begin to change their sexist stand” (Ogunyemi 1996: 65). Ogunyemi (1996: 126) also advocates for gender balance in every aspect of life in Nigeria through what she refers to as the four Cs – collaboration, conciliation, consensus, and complementarity (see also Ezeigbo 2012: 20).

Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie proposes another form of feminist theory stating that “African women do not view men as their primary enemy because African men

have never had the same institutionalizing power to oppress African women as the white men have had to oppress white women” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 155). However, she clearly stresses that “all over the world today [...] women are oppressed [...] They have been owned, used and worked as horses, even today” (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 27). Ogundipe calls her feminist definition, ‘Stiwanism.’ Stiwanism comes from ‘STIWA’ – an acronym for “Social Transformation Including Women in Africa”. She proposes that men and women alike can play a key role in a gender-inclusive social transformation (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 229).

Obioma Nnaemeka perceives of African women’s activism in terms of ‘Nego-feminism’ or ‘feminism of negotiation’, which she considers a way for the African women’s survival. She describes Nego-feminism first as ‘*feminism of negotiation*’ (Nnaemeka 2004: 337), and second, stresses that Nego-feminism stands for ‘*no ego*’ *feminism* which captures central concerns in many African cultures including negotiation, give and take, complementarity, space-sharing, and collaboration (Nnaemeka 2004: 337).

Akachi T. Ezeigbo proposes another variant of African feminism, which she calls ‘Snail-sense feminism’ (Ezeigbo 2012). She explains that Snail-sense feminism is derived from the Igbo philosophy which posits that dialogue and negotiation are superior to aggression, confrontation, and fighting (*nkolika*). Ezeigbo explains her metaphor as “a snail crawls over thorns, boulders and rocks with a well lubricated tongue by negotiating with objects and obstacles on its way and will arrive its destination unharmed” (Agbo 2021: 61-62). So, the theory advocates for peace, mutual respect, and sensitivity in gender relations. Ezeigbo also emphasizes her strong belief in dialoguing and negotiation as the best means of achieving societal equilibrium or harmonious relationships between genders by highlighting how nations, communities, groups, and individuals achieve peace only after they have decided to embrace dialogue and negotiation to resolve their differences (Ezeigbo 2015: 36-41). This was the basis for peace and harmonious co-existence in pre-colonial African society as portrayed in Adimora-Ezeigbo’s novel *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, I argue that men, women, and children will resolve their gender difference issues effectively when there is peace and mutual respect in the family.

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<sup>1</sup> In her literary publications, the writer and scholar Akachi Ezeigbo has added her father’s name to her name.

### **Conceptualizing Modern Women, Decolonizing Gender Relations, Fighting Patriarchal Powers and the Mute Speaking through a Feminist Lens**

Both Nawal El Saadawi and Chimamanda Adichie portray the patriarchal oppressive roles of men, tradition, and religion used in shaping women's conditions in different parts of Africa. They have created muted women who turn to express the pain caused by patriarchy through rebellion and murderous acts. The creation of a powerful voice out of silence highlights the unapologetic dissent of the mute that disarms authorities and promotes change. Adichie's feminist characters, for instance, show that when they are pushed to the wall, their silence speaks louder than their voices. This is the case of Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*, Eugene Achike's wife, who deliberately and slowly kills her husband by repeatedly poisoning his tea to free her children and herself from domestic violence.

In this novel, Adichie explores issues relating to domestic violence and religious fanaticism. Through the traumatic experiences of Kambili, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, her mother, Beatrice, and her older brother, Jaja, Adichie suggests that muted victims are more dangerous than those who speak out. Amidst the frequent violence that her father, Eugene, inflicts on the family, the rebellion that stems from the oppression and subjugation of women is brought to the fore. Kambili's life is clouded by pain and fear of brutal attacks from her fanatical Roman Catholic father, Eugene. Eugene once poured boiling water on Kambili's feet and on another occasion nearly beats her to death. Yet, he cries and shows concern for her at her hospital bed, saying, "My precious daughter. Nothing will happen to you. My precious daughter" (Adichie 2006: 207). The torture of Eugene's tyranny causes Kambili to grow up fearful, withdrawn, and unable to relate freely or comfortably to other children, with the exception of her brother Jaja.

Eugene also cuts off Jaja's little finger when he fails to live up to Eugene's inconsequential and hypocritical beliefs. Beatrice is not left out. She is beaten so often by Eugene that she loses two unborn children during pregnancy. Despite the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma, Beatrice is voiceless and unable to protect herself and her children because she is totally dependent on her husband. She would neither cry out for help or complain for fear that if she left Eugene, other women would take him away from her. Ezeigbo calls the kind of silence Beatrice exhibits a "sterile and unhealthy silence" (2019: 120), and this kind of silence usually comes when a victim accepts her fate out of fear of being isolated from society. Although Beatrice is muted by the mental and physical torture, she surprisingly decides to kill Eugene by gradually poisoning his tea every day. Kambili recalls Beatrice's confession to her and Jaja, "I started pouring

the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor" (Adichie 2006: 283).

In El Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983), the protagonist Firdaus kills her male oppressor, Marzouk the pimp, and even wants to kill other men. In *Two Women in One* (1985), the same author creates a female protagonist who rebels against the patriarchal structures that dominate and dictate how she should live. Her rebellion is to free women from all kinds of prisons. In *Woman at Point Zero* and *Two Women in One*, El Sadaawi highlights the condition of women who demand change in interpersonal relationships, religious doctrines, and ideological and structural change in the society. The desired change is achieved by decolonizing the minds of Africans and by returning to the African historical heritage of respect for women.

Firdaus, the protagonist of *Woman at Point Zero*, like Beatrice in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, is turned into a living ghost by patriarchal oppression. She recalls how, as a child, she was abused by her own parents by being forced into child labour. Firdaus is not only a victim of child labour and abuse but also of sexual harassment and incest, female genital mutilation, early and forced marriage, domestic violence, and sexual slavery. The mental torture she suffers at the hands of her oppressors, her husband, Sheikh Mahmoud, and Bayoumi, the man who gave her shelter when she ran away from her husband, drives her into prostitution to survive in a patriarchal Islamic society. She remains silent, accepting that men and society dictate her life until she fights a pimp who wants to own her and the wealth she has created from prostitution. She kills him in self-defence without remorse and develops a desire to kill men.

Growing up as a child, she witnessed the degrading treatment of women by the men in her family, where her father was the master and her mother almost like a slave. Firdaus is introduced to child labor and exposed to male oppression at a very tender age, as she is always sent by her parents to water the crops in the field. She recalls, "On my head I always carried a heavy earthenware jar, full of water. Under its weight my neck would sometimes jack backwards, or to the left or to the right" (El Saadawi 1983: 11). This exposure leads to her being sexually abused as a child by her friend Mohammadain, who accompanies his father to the farm. When her mother discovers Mohammadain's sexual transgressions (El Saadawi 1983: 12), the only way she can deal with it is to end the supposed sexual activity of her daughter through subjecting her to genital circumcision which is another way of degrading women. The societal view is young girls should not have sexual pleasure and her mother had to end it. Firdaus recalls the pains she is made to feel: "First she beat me. Then she brought a woman who

was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. I cried all night” (El Saadawi 1983: 12).

Firdaus’ uncle, who is much older than her, also molests her sexually by caressing her to satisfy his sexual pleasure. Knowing that what he does to her is wrong, he withdraws his hand whenever he hears footsteps at the entrance of the house (El Saadawi 1983: 13). When her parents die, the same uncle takes her to the city, Cairo. Despite his religious pretensions, the abusive uncle makes her a sex slave until he marries. This is a man who is supposed to guide and advise her. When he gets married to a woman from a wealthy family and begins to enjoy a legal sexual relationship, he sends Firdaus off to a boarding school. Later, he cheats on his wife, marries her off to his wife’s uncle, who is old enough to be Firdaus’ father and uses her bride price to clear his debts. Firdaus’ husband, Sheikh Mahmoud, is not only forty years older than her but has a leaking smelly wound on his chin that secretes pus. He starves her, forces himself on her, and beats her when she tries to resist. She runs back to her uncle’s house and she is sent back. Her uncle justifies violence against women claiming that the Koran permits men to beat their wives in order to correct them. Firdaus narrates her ordeal that, “on one occasion he hit me all over with his shoe. My face and body became swollen and bruised. So I left the house and went to my uncle. But my uncle told me that all husbands beat their wives” (El Saadawi 1983: 46). Firdaus takes to the street and is rescued by Bayoumi, whom she believes to be her savior, and his friends. When she discloses to Bayoumi that she has a secondary school certificate and wants to use it to get a job, Bayoumi gets angry, locks her up in a room, beats her up, rapes her every night, and brings his friends to rape her, too. Firdaus explains her traumatic experiences under Bayoumi thus:

“He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with his weight. I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desires, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, like a piece of wood, or an empty sack, or a shoe.” (El Saadawi 1983: 52)

Firdaus is forced into prostitution and even the police officer, who is supposed to protect her, rapes her. She later leaves prostitution for a job in a company where she meets Ibrahim whom she loves deeply. Ibrahim also betrays her by abandoning her to marry the chairman’s daughter after declaring his love to her. Ade and Hall affirm that “[s]he [Firdaus] degenerates to a point of frustration, insatiability and suicidal tendency” (2023: 187). She is heartbroken and decides to go back



into prostitution. She makes a lot of wealth through prostitution but still notices that men and the society see women as objects to be owned. Marzouk, the pimp, wants to own her and everything she has made through prostitution. The domestic violence at the hands of her father and husband is overshadowed by the trauma of being owned by a pimp. In self-defence, she overpowers and kills Marzouk when he tries to kill her with a knife, and her fear of men is destroyed.

Killing Marzouk frees her from the fear of patriarchal tyrants and transforms her into a fighter. Kammampool asserts that Firdaus becomes the “master” and Marzouk the “slave” (2014: 23). She realizes that it is better to die fighting for survival than accepting to die in silence. She therefore decides that every man who tries again to dishonor the woman in her must pay with his blood for what she has suffered from men. El Saadawi uses Firdaus to portray that the mute also speaks and when she speaks, she speaks in an unapologetic dissent that can be more powerful than words. If society has built structures that deny women a voice and allow men to rejoice in displaying their hegemonic masculinity in the name of making women submissive, then society should also tolerate the silence and super strength of women fighting for their survival.

In *Two Women in One*, El Saadawi introduces Bahiah Shahem, the novel’s protagonist, a victim of female genital mutilation and forced arranged marriage to a suitor who is her family’s “perfect” choice for her. Bahiah rebels against her family and societal expectations, involves herself in activism during a students’ riot at school, for which her father takes her out of school and gives her into marriage to her cousin, Yaseen. El Saadawi portrays the Egyptian society as one in which women have little or no rights, and in which the male relatives find it appropriate to silence Bahiah so that she will know her limits. Her family’s disregard for her choice of career – she wants to be an artist but is forced to study medicine – and the fact that she is not allowed to marry the man she loves is emotional torture for her, which she confronts by staying silent. Her aunt, who suffers from lung disease, wants her to specialize in medicine while her uncle wants her to become a well-paid doctor and marry his son, who is a business school graduate.

Even though she remains silent, Bahiah never succumbs to her family’s expectations. El Saadawi uses her silence to deconstruct social confinement. In her small bedroom, Bahiah continues to draw. She draws “a face and a pair of eyes glaring up from the white paper, a pair of wide black eyes like her own, staring at her woman to woman” (El Saadawi 1985: 33). Her father comes into her room, sees it, slaps her, crumples the sheet and throws it away, saying, “What do you mean by wasting your time scribbling” (El Saadawi 1985: 34). Yet Bahiah continues to

draw, hiding her art under her bed sheets so that her father will not see it. In the university art exhibition, her art objects become her way of establishing her own identity. She refuses to be defined by the socially constructed female identities.

She further deviates from family and societal expectations by having a sexual relationship with Saleem, a medical student she meets at the art exhibition. The exhibition ends with her involvement in public protest and her arrest. Her continuous fight against male domination over her life aims to encourage all women to fight against any norm and tradition that keeps them in perpetual slavery and affirms that the mute always speaks in actions that convey more powerful messages than vocal words. Ellen Addis affirms that “illicit, pre-marital sex with Saleem becomes an act which allows Bahiah to destabilize male dominance over her body and find her ‘true self even more’” (2020: n.p.). Saadawi's critique of marriage as a patriarchal institution is also highlighted by Nkealah, who argues that Saadawi's writing shows that “marriage is one of the areas in which the patriarchal oppression of Muslim women is most visible and intense’ (Nkealah 2014: 230).

In the selected texts, El Saadawi and Adichie advocate that a new image of the African woman needs to be constructed. They stress the need for women's education and economic independence, which will enable them to make impacts in their societies, as they take on leadership roles. Beatrice is a housewife and dependent on her husband, yet she is paid back with domestic violence. Beatrice is suppressed into silence because of her fear of isolation, but she becomes stronger in speaking in a murderous voice through her actions. But Auntie Ifeoma, Eugene's younger sister in *Purple Hibiscus*, is a senior lecturer in the university yet she fights injustice and promotes Igbo culture. El Saadawi also devoted her writing to the liberation of women, especially in a predominant Islamic society based on her personal experiences. As a psychologist, while conducting research on the effect of imprisoning and killing women in Egypt, she met a woman called Firdaus after whom she modelled the character in her novel. Her research made her realize how the Egyptian society as an Islamic and patriarchal society had produced women who could only hate men because of the oppression and male domination they experience. In Bahiah, the author narrates her personal experience of being forced into a medical career by her parents. She advocates through her writings for the society to desist from oppressing women but to allow women to identify their true self. Benon Tugume asserts that “Nawal El Saadawi identifies religious fundamentalist movements as one of the obstacles to women's liberation,” and that she further states “that all

major religions are patriarchal, based on a male God and hence male dominance" (2021: 120).

As in the lives of her characters, Firdaus and Bahiah, El Saadawi fights against the government's refusal to allow women to work after acquiring western education and to choose careers for themselves. El Saadawi and Adichie advocate for men to know the true value of women and respect them. They fight against men and the society which make women voiceless and powerless through subjugation. They achieved their aim by decolonizing female characters' minds as well as by deconstructing the effect of Islamic and Christian religious dogmas that make women to be subordinate to men.

Through the character of Bahiah, El Saadawi advocates for self-discovery and self-assertion and in Firdaus, she advocates that women should confront their fears rather than fleeing from them. As societies are evolving and the tools for women's marginalization continue to grow, it takes radical women to rebel against accepted societal and religious structures; to challenge the use of Islamic religion as legitimation for domestic violence and other forms of violence against women. Instead of asking for state pardon, Firdaus prefers to bear the consequences for killing Marzouk. Bahiah rebels against her family's choice of a suitor and a career, continues her artistic work, enters a sexual relationship with a man she loves, and involves herself in public protest. She is withdrawn from school for her actions and forced into marrying a man chosen for her by her family. Firdaus and Bahiah pay for their murderous and rebellious acts, but they show no remorse because they fight for the liberation of all women. They have the courage not only to endure their pain but to fight the patriarchal society that keeps them down. Through Beatrice, Adichie eliminates Eugene, the tyrant and hypocritical husband, and father. This proves that patriarchy continues to serve as a catalyst for breeding and legitimizing violence and discrimination against women, and that it is imperative that women come out boldly to challenge and dismantle patriarchal attitudes, practices, and structures.

El Saadawi and Adichie also highlight the need for women to be in mutual relationship with one another. Women need to exhibit kindness, gentle, and compassionate attitudes towards one another, and be patient to empower in themselves the spirit of encouraging one another. It is through women bonding or sisterhood that patriarchal dominance would be effectively challenged. Mutual relationships will foster their gaining self-worth. In *Purple Hibiscus*, it is Sisi, the family's domestic worker, who gets the rat poison that Beatrice adds to Eugene's tea. Auntie Ifeoma advises and encourages Beatrice to speak out or quit the marriage when Eugene almost kills Kambili, "'This cannot go on *nwunye m,*'

Aunty Ifeoma said. ‘When a house is on fire, you run out before the roof collapses on your head.’ ‘It has never happened like this before. He has never punished her like this before,’ Mama said” (Adichie 2006: 209). Instead of helping and encouraging Firdaus to overcome oppression, her mother and Sherifa become instruments working against her by exposing her to female circumcision and introducing her to prostitution to gain from her respectively. Bahiah’s mother and aunt, too, force her into a career and a marriage she would not choose herself. The physical, emotional, and psychological torture that Firdaus and Bahiah experience at the hands of the women in their lives contribute to their rebellious and murderous decisions. Adichie’s employment of a “unity is strength” ideology in *Purple Hibiscus* among Beatrice and her children reveals the happy and blissful family Eugene Achike’s family transforms to after his death. This affirms the importance of respect for each gender as the most effective way of achieving societal equilibrium or harmonious relationships between genders in the society.

Christian faith has been misused to preach that the woman is the weaker sex in reference to the biblical account of creation. Chidili points out that “men have seized their sexuality to subjugate and maltreat women” (2005: 5). Beatrice decolonizes her mind and refutes the Christian ideology of a woman being the weaker sex by killing Eugene. Ezeigbo rightly affirms that: “Her case demonstrates that a timid or weak individual can take extreme action when pushed to the wall or provoked beyond endurance.” (2019: 118)

In creating the character of a woman like Firdaus, who walks in the street with her head high after killing a man, El Saadawi also refutes patriarchal ideology of women tolerating ill treatments from men. If a prostitute says no to men that patronize her, she ceases to be a prostitute because prostitutes earn their living from selling their bodies to men, and Firdaus says no from time to time. She refuses a very important personality, the Head of State (El Saadawi 1983: 98). Firdaus’ journey from an oppressive and violent marriage into sex work make such an impression on the first person narrator, who listens to her testimony in prison, that she concludes that “marriage was the system built on the most cruel suffering for women” (El Saadawi 1983: 87), and that a “successful prostitute was better than a misled saint” (El Saadawi 1983: 86); she detests the Egyptian society for its wrong value of women. El Saadawi highlights how men and society have used Islam to force women into prostitution, just as Adichie highlights the hypocrisy of Christian men through the character of Eugene, who is a saint outside his family. In Bahiah, we see a woman who refuses to be defined by the norms and religion that work against women in her patriarchal society. She continues to define herself by her actions. These writers, as woman-

ists, advocate the self-esteem of women and the liberation of men from the patriarchal ideology imposed on them by imported religion.

Some of Adichie and El Saadawi's female characters are also women who use silence as a weapon for fighting against male domination. Beatrice dresses shabbily and withdraws into her own shell after the death of her husband. Critics may argue that she feels guilty because of her role in her husband's death and that is the reason for her silence. But in essence, what she displays is a different kind of silence which she uses to draw her children closer to her. Kambili recalls how Beatrice establishes her family bond by first winning Jaja over to her side. Kambili asks, "'Why did you put it in his tea?' I asked Mama, rising. My voice was loud. I was loud. I was almost screaming. 'Why in his tea?'" (Adichie 2006: 283). This silence expresses Beatrice's unbearable pains, and fear that have made her mute: "But Mama did not answer. Not even when I stood up and shook her until Jaja yanked me away. Not even when he wrapped his arms around me and turned to include her but she moved away" (Adichie 2006: 283). Motsemme (2004) describes this situation as one in which the character is unable to understand what is going on around her. Firdaus also refuses to talk to anyone in her prison cell. She only breaks the silence a few minutes before her execution and narrates her ordeal in a very captivating manner.

When Eugene hits Beatrice on the stomach with a small table and which ends her six weeks pregnancy, Beatrice realizes that her silence will not save her. She is forced to speak in a more powerful way similar to when Audre Lorde transcends silence to speak out, that "I was going to die, if not sooner than later, whether or not I had even spoken myself. My silence had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" (1977: 81). Beatrice finally breaks her silence as she speaks to her children, who, like her, suffered under her husband's tyranny. She leaves her hospital bed and travels to Auntie Ifeoma's house in Nsukka where her children are on holidays and narrates her ordeal to them as if she is talking about what has happened to someone else. It is as if Beatrice's head is going to burst as she is trying to bear the pain, "'I do not know if my head is correct,' she said, and pressed the back of her hand to her forehead [...] I got back from hospital today. The doctor told me to rest, [...] I hired a taxi and came here.'" (Adichie 2006: 243).

Watching her cry uncontrollably all through the night, Jaja understands how deeply hurt his mother is. This is why wilfully, Jaja offers a different form of masculinity by laying down his own life to save her from paying for her murder offence. Firstly, he starts by protecting Beatrice from Kambili's anger to be able to reinforce the family bond. Kambili who previously imagines why their mother of all people should kill their father is transformed by Jaja's decision to go to jail for

their mother's offence. Kambili realizes that Jaja is more manly than their father, Eugene. She is forced to stand with her mother and elder brother because "unity is strength." In silence, Kambili joins her mother in taking necessary actions to save Jaja, their hero, no matter what it will take rather than dwelling on the hypocrisy of her father. She declares the power in the new silence in her home thus:

"There is so much more that Mama and I do not talk about. We do not talk about the huge checks we have written, for bribes to judges and policemen and prison guards. We do not talk about how much money we have, even after half of Papa's estate went to St. Agnes and to the fostering of missions in the church. And we have never talked about finding out that Papa had anonymously donated to the children's hospitals and motherless babies' homes and disabled veterans from the civil war. There is still so much that we do not say with our voices, that we do not turn into words." (Adichie 2006: 289)

Kambili and her brother even go as far as to speak with their eyes. When she and her mother visit Jaja in the prison after completing arrangements for his release to assure him that he would be out the following week, she speaks to Jaja in a language she calls '*asusuanya*', a language of the eyes, "He stops chewing and stares at me silently with those eyes that have hardened a little every month he has spent here; [...] I even wonder if we ever really had an *asusuanya*, a language of the eyes, or if I imagined it all. [...] 'You're coming home next week.'" (Adichie 2006: 297, italics E. Urama).

Through this language of the eyes, Jaja understands that Kambili's attitude towards him has changed but wonders what performed the magic. He is so surprised and keeps staring at Kambili as if he is in a dream. Kambili, having understood Jaja's actions so well, now expresses her wish for Jaja to see into her heart; to see the new Kambili that has emerged, a new Kambili who has realized that he is her hero, "His eyes are too full of guilt to really see me, to see his reflection in my eyes, the reflection of my hero, the brother who tried always to protect me the best he could" (Adichie 2006: 297). The new Jaja, the hero, and the new Kambili understand each other speaking with their eyes. In silence, mother and children celebrate their victory and appreciate their decision to speak out unapologetically through actions to end their pain. Kambili emphasizes how the family also speaks on another level of silence which is better than the one that is dangerous, "Silence hangs over us, but it is a different kind of silence, one that lets me breathe. I have nightmares about the other kind, the

silence of when Papa was alive” (Adichie 2006: 297). Kambili affirms that the new silence also brings healing to Jaja, reunion to the family, and will lead to a brighter and blissful future for everyone in their family. She happily keeps talking about her family’s future relationships because Eugene, the tyrant, is out of the way. Beatrice smiles in approval because she believes it is going to be a blissful future and says, “‘Thank you, nne.’ It is one of the few times in the past three years that she has spoken without being first spoken to [...] I am laughing. I reach out and place my arm around Mama’s shoulder and she leans towards me and smiles” (Adichie 2006: 298). Kambili displays feelings of hope for a better future for her family.

## Conclusion

African feminist theories built on African culture and values have provided the platform for the discussion of African women writers and their works. *Woman at Point Zero*, *Two Women in One*, and *Purple Hibiscus* are transformational discourses, and El Saadawi and Adichie politically satirize African society condemning religious fanaticism, sexism, domestic violence, and oppression of women based on the accepted tradition and culture as well as foreign cultures imported through colonialism. They give insight in the patriarchal dominance of men, societal values, and major religions in Africa, as well as show how women fight for their liberation. Furthermore, they affirm the fact that violence against women also calls for female liberative violence.

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