



## CULTURE: A VESSEL FOR FEMALE SUBORDINATION IN THREE AFRICAN NOVELS

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### Abstract:

Since the dawn of time, women generally have had fewer legal rights and status in society than their male counterparts. The continuous subordination and suppression of women are further aggravated by traditions, cultural beliefs and religions of most societies which favor patriarchy. Using the radical feminist approach, the present paper attempts an exploration of patriarchy as an aspect of culture which helps to subordinate women as highlighted in Nawal El Saadawi's *A Woman at Point Zero* (1983), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995). It also examines the steps taken by the women to free themselves from the "chains" of male domination and oppression. The study revealed that cultural practices such as polygamy, female genital mutilation and sexual abuse facilitate the abuse, subjugation and oppression of women in the novels under study. The study has implications for the theory of feminism and literary criticisms.

**Keywords:** feminism, patriarchy, subordination, culture

### 1. Introduction

Since the dawn of time, women generally have had fewer legal rights and status in society than their male counterparts. Womanhood and wifehood are considered

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preserves of women in Africa. However, the assertion of their rights and statuses lie in the domain of men in their society. Silence and total submission have become the virtues by which a woman is defined in African society. In recent years, issues affecting women have had and continue to have some illumination not only by female writers but also by their male compatriots.

The daunting reality in Africa is that women are subordinated and suppressed because it is a male-dominated society- patriarchal society. The continuous subordination and suppression of women are further aggravated by traditions, cultural beliefs and religions of most societies which favor patriarchy. Women dare not challenge the status quo as this will be met with vehement reprisal. Injustices and subordination perpetrated by men must be accepted and not challenged since they are considered older than society itself. Any challenge to these phenomena is an affront on customs, traditions and religions. Succumbing to these societal demands, the African woman has no voice in issues that affect her let alone society. Thus, she is to be seen and not heard or else she earns a tag as immoral and a disgrace to womanhood. Womanhood has therefore become quintessential total submission.

Lately, women have sought peaceful ways of bridging this gap. This is done through the power of the pen. They attempt to bring issues that affect women to the doorstep of society. This they do in order to call attention to their plights so as to cause social change.

Using the radical feminist approach, the present paper attempts an exploration of patriarchy as an aspect of culture which helps to subordinate women as highlighted in Nawal El Saadawi's *A Woman at Point Zero* (1983), Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* (1995). It also examines the steps taken by the women to free themselves from the "chains" of male domination and oppression. It concludes that female subordination is at the detriment of women and the society therefore, it should be discouraged and completely eliminated. The women have made their voices heard through their writings in their attempts to liberate women from the shackles of dominance, subordination, exploitation and subjugation. All these writers who are regarded as feminist writers have attracted attention from critics and their readership. A cursory study of these novels will help to bring out the ill-effects of patriarchy, an aspect of culture which perpetuates women subordination.

Nawal El Saadawi is a psychiatrist who doubles as a renowned writer and lives in Egypt. She writes in Arabic and has authored over forty books which are both fiction and non-fiction. Her books and novels which usually tell the situations of women have impacted positively the lives of women and men alike. She was born in 1931 to peasant parent who lived in a village called Kafr Tahla in Egypt. She had the rare opportunity of education which was an exception rather than a norm at the time. According to Multi-

Douglas (1995), she was one of about fifty women among the numerous men of her time to have studied medicine, psychiatry to be precise.

Nawal is famous for her writings which seek to represent the voice of the voiceless Arab women and by extension any woman in patriarchal society the world over. In other words, she through her writings advocates for the liberation of women who are silenced in the Arab communities and the world at large. *A Woman at Point Zero* and *The Hidden Face of Eve* are some of her controversial books to this effect. Although it is a sacrilege to talk about issues of sexuality in the Arab communities, Nawal publicly discusses issues relating to sex in her book, *Women and Sex* (1969) - A reason for which the book was banned by the political and religious powers of the time due to her condemnation of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Her works relate sexual problems to the political and economic oppression of the leaders. *A Woman At Point Zero* relates how an extremely patriarchal society pushes a young woman, Firdaus into prostitution because the society has no place for a woman to work although she has got some level of education-high school certificate.

Similarly, Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos in 1944. She was considered very brilliant in school a reason for which she won a scholarship into the Methodist High School at age ten. After the death of her father when she was barely seventeen years, circumstances compelled her to marry. In 1960, she moved to London to join her husband who had gone in pursuance of further studies. Emecheta, who had to endure countless battering from her husband with whom she had five children, could take it no more so she opted out of the marriage. This however did not deter her from working hard to attain a degree in Sociology. She worked as a social worker in London and single-handedly fended for her five children. In order to complement her job to enable her adequately support herself and family, she started writing. Most of her early writings are a depiction of her life experiences.

Some of her works include *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977) and in 1979 she wrote *The Joys of Motherhood* which depicts the life of a young married woman who fights tooth and nail to meet the demands of a patriarchal society which sees fulfilment of a woman only in her ability to bear especially male children.

Born in 1956 in Tamale in the Northern Region of Ghana, the then Gold Coast, Amma Darko graduated from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) with Diploma in 1980 and worked at the Science and Technology Centre of the University. *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), *Housemaid* (1997), *Faceless* (2003) and *Not without Flowers* (2007) are some of her works.

*Beyond the Horizon* takes the reader into the life of a young woman Mara, the protagonist, who suffers brutalization and exploitation at the hands of her husband in

order to satisfy his whims and caprices. He goes to the extent of turning her into a prostitute in a foreign land-Germany. Her books usually deal with serious issues of prostitution, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, wife battering and so on.

The three African women writers Nawal El Saadawi, Buchi Emecheta and Amma Darko tread common grounds on issues that directly or indirectly affect women of African societies.

Plethora of factors work in tandem to accentuate the subordination of women. Mention can be made of inter-alia culture, femininity and patriarchy.

The concept of culture lends itself as an alibi to perpetuate the domination of men over women. Like many other sociological constructs, culture, has defied a precise definition due to the complexity of its nature. Many scholars have defined it differently from the perspectives of their disciplines. According to Margaret Mead (1953:13), Culture means *"the whole complex of traditions behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation."* Hofstede (1980: 21-23) shares this view. To him, *"Culture is a collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group from another passed on from generation to generation"*. It can be inferred from the foregoing that the human being is the total product of his/her culture.

According to Spencer-Oatey (2008:3), *"Culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but does not determine) each members' behavior and his/her interpretations of 'meaning' of other people's behavior"* - A view which is shared by Brown (2008). He postulates that culture refers to the language, beliefs, values and norms, customs, dress, diet, roles, knowledge and skills, and all the other things that people learn that make up the 'way of life' of any society. To this end, culture is both tangible and intangible aspects of the lives of a group of people. It can then be said that culture is a reflection of human life and identity. Culture is passed on from one generation to the other through the processes of socialization. It sometimes favors one gender more than the other since how individuals interpret the norms is relevant to their expectations. Some bend the rules of these norms in their favor. The view that culture is passed on from generation to generation is shared by most anthropologists. This implies that both the positive and negative effects of culture are passed on to generations even unborn. In other words, the positive effects of culture tend to ensure the faster growth and development of the society whereas the negative ones hinder growth and development.

Culture manifests itself at various levels of society such as the family, marriage, occupation, education, religion to mention a few. These institutions use femininity, sexuality and patriarchal practices as exponents for the continued subordination of women.

Femininity and masculinity or one's gender is the degree to which members of a society see themselves as masculine or feminine given the standard set for them by society identity (Burke, Stets and Pirog-Good 1988; Spence 1985). Culture defines for members what being male or female means (e.g., active or passive, dominant or subordinate, brave or emotional respectively), and males will generally respond by defining themselves as masculine while females will generally define themselves as feminine. Because these are social definitions, both males and females can reverse their roles where one can be female, see herself as masculine or male, and see himself as feminine. The concept of femininity is not bad inherently, but in Africa and some parts of the world which are patriarchal, it is used negatively as means of subjugating women to the whims and caprices of mostly men as will be highlighted in the texts under study. This makes the society imbalanced towards the favoring of men rather than women. The society then becomes a patriarchal one.

Patriarchy has been in existence as far back as before the birth of Jesus Christ. Aristotle posited that women mistakenly developed as a result of a fall in temperature so women were the defective part of humanity, Weiz (2003), an ideology which has traversed through time to our contemporary world.

The concept of patriarchy has variegated definitions. Mitchell, a feminist psychologist, uses the word *Patriarchy* to refer to kinship systems in which men exchange women, Mitchell, (1971). Walby, (1990) opines that patriarchy is a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, exploit and oppress women. As a system, it includes natural traits: the belief that men and women are naturally different because of their biological make-up and, are, therefore assigned different roles or "the notion that every individual man is always in a dominant position and every woman in a subordinate one" (*Ibid*). Hooks () provides us with an understanding of Patriarchy as "a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence". (<http://laff-experiment.org> pp1)

Beauvior (1974) contends that in a patriarchal society, men see women as very different from themselves and thus, the women's statuses are reduced to second class. The woman is defined in terms of how different she is from the man.

Patriarchy, as an aspect of culture, has become institutionalized in society. Social structures provide the enabling environment for male superiority to persist. It refers to the male dominance either privately or even publicly of females. Feminists usually see patriarchy as their main problem in society. Its absence will mean some relief for feminist activists.

Sexuality may refer to sexual acts, practices, behaviors orientations or even desire as aspects of human nature. Sexuality has to do with how identity, practices, desires are bundled together as socially accepted or rejected but with variegated degrees in various societies, Mc Dowell & Pringle (1992). Males and females differ both structurally and functionally. The sum of these differences could be referred to as sexuality. Sexuality is affected by a number of factors which interact to enhance an individual's sexuality. These include biological, genetic, social and psychological factors. One of the results of patriarchy is female subordination.

Female subordination as defined by Cobuild (2010) is a situation where the female human being is made to believe, accept, and acknowledge that someone else is more important than her. Female subordination manifests itself in the lack of access to resources or inability to take part in decision making. It may also refer to the power relation or dominance relation between men and women.

The assertion that the female in most African societies is powerless tends to diminish her self-esteem and self-confidence. The subordination that women experience on routine basis, without any regards for their personality can take many ways. These include discrimination, insult, verbal abuse, control, disregard, oppression, violence, exploitation and misuse at the family, marriage, work place, religion, and educational levels in society. Specifically, women subordination comes in the form of male preference, discrimination against girls, problem of household work on women and girls, unequal educational opportunities for girls, men control over women and girls, sexual abuse at both workplaces and homes, inability to own property or even inherit one, men's control of bodies and sexuality, no control over fertility or reproductive rights and worse of all wife battering.

With reference to the three novels under study, it is seen that the subordination of women begins at the level of the family which is a micro unit of the society. This rears its ugly head in the choice of a husband for the women. In all the three books, the prerogative of choosing a husband for the women rests in the hands of their fathers or guardians. The woman cannot refuse the choice. Her consent is taken for granted in the choice of the prospective husband although; she is the one to stay with him. The women are usually involved in arranged marriages. Emecheta reports this in *The Joys of Motherhood* where Agbadi, the father of Nnu Ego makes arrangements for her to marry another man after Amatokwu sends her away because she is unable to bear children for him. Emecheta recounts:

*"Nnu Ego, my pet child, you know I have been making preliminary arrangements for you to go to another man?"*

(p. 37-38)

The decision rests in the hands of the father not the daughter. Further, Nnaife is the one who arranges and gives out his daughter to his choice of a husband. When Kehinde attempts to choose her own husband, he threatens to put an end to the life of the boy. For him, the money he receives as bride price is pivotal in the choice. Love or happiness is taken for granted. When his daughter decides to defy his orders in order to fulfil her own choice of a husband, he gets furious and storms the house of his prospective father-in-law inflicting cutlass wounds on the boy. Nnaife categorically states that:

*"We don't do that in Ibuza. I will choose husbands for my girls.  
They are too young to know their own minds."*

(p. 237)

Two things come up forcefully from Nnaife's assertions. If the daughters are too young to choose husbands for themselves, why will he then marry them off to men? The answer lies in the fact that in such patriarchal societies, the girls are considered commodities to be sold for a fee-the bride price. Second, women are considered to possess low cognitive ability and that they cannot reason for themselves but require others to do the reasoning for them. In this light, the status of the woman is reduced to the level of a sub-human.

In El-Saadawi's *A Woman at Point Zero*, an arranged marriage for Firdaus who is barely nineteen is contracted by her uncle to the elderly Sheikh Mahmoud, an over sixty year old man. We will have expected that her uncle who has had a considerable level of education at Al-Azhar University will have given Firdaus a chance to make a choice but what do we see? He is also compelled by the demands of patriarchal society to accept Firdaus' bride price and unfortunately, Firdaus is subjected to being passive in the choice. Indeed, if Firdaus is given the right to choose, given her level of education and exposure she will have made an informed choice not to accept the elderly Sheikh Mahmoud as her husband- a retired worker, a widower and a miser. No wonder she tries to escape this sort of captivity but fails. It is seen in these instances that culture which is represented by traditional marriage is used as a tool on subjecting the views of the female characters in the novels. Therborn (2004:107) for instance, asserts that:

*"In a global perspective one of the most powerful expressions of patriarchy is paternal and/or parental power over children's marriage."*

Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* paints a similar picture of feminine subordination through. We see Mara's mother breaking the supposed "good news" to her on the issue of her marriage. How she tells Mara the news is quite revealing.

*"Your father has found a husband for you", she gasped, "a good man."*

(p. 4)

The husbands in all three novels are the fathers' or the guardians' choices and not the young women in question. They derive their authority to do so (that is choose husbands for their daughters) from the patriarchal nature of their society.

The payment of bride price arrogates to some of the men the idea that they have "bought" the women from their fathers. The woman was considered one of her master's (husband's) belongings just as any other physical property. Darko categorically states it thus:

*"So much that so I later learnt that drunk from palm wine and belching boisterously, he had proclaimed that he would gladly have given me away even for one goat. But like I said, Akobi's father bought me off very handsomely. And while Akobi returned to the city to work, the customs and traditional rites were got over and done on a Friday evening, arriving in Naka on Saturday, and left for the city on the same Saturday with me as his wife...and property!"*

(p. 7)

It is therefore quite understandable the way Akobi treats Mara, his wife, as a purchased property. Per the dictates of the patriarchal society, she is supposed to be submissive and obedient, which is the hallmark of a "good wife". (Weiz, 2003) She also accepts the fact that she is his property. Her father worsens the situation since his formula in choosing husbands for his children was dependent on how much a prospective husband could give as bride price:

*"But father, it appeared, had a different formula for choosing or accepting husbands for his daughters, which took more into consideration the number of cows coming as the bride price than the character of the man."*

(p. 4)

This paints a gloomy picture of the woman as seen as a sex tool and a commodity to be bought in the market. The only way she can redeem herself from the bond of marriage is through the father or guardian's ability to repay the bride price. But



for her father's ability to refund his money, Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood* will have continued to remain the property of her ex-husband, Amatokwu. Agbadi's repayment of Nnu Ego's bride price with "interest" (the interest in the form of a goat, which he considers an insult) shows his capability as a father and frees his daughter from Amatokwu's grips. Agbadi then marries her off to another man, Nnaife, for a similar bride price. In this regard, the women pass through the hands of their perceived lords like a piece of property from one owner to another. In the case of Mara in *Beyond the Horizon* however, she concedes that her father is incapable of paying back the bride price so she will continue to endure the bad treatments meted out to her by Akobi. She is to grapple with two issues:

*"Not only will I not be welcomed back into the family, but father would never be able to afford to refund my dowry, much of it he'd already squandered"*

(p. 9)

She is thus enmeshed in the domain of Akobi and he does whatever he wishes with her. The preference of male over female children among most cultures in Africa is yet another element of patriarchy which makes room to female subordination. In such societies, a father's pride is measured by the number of male children he has and not the female ones. A wife's position in her husband's house as well as her image in society is enhanced by her ability to bear male children. Her status in her husband's house becomes a temporary one if she fails to do so. Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, demonstrates the culture of placing premium on male children. A chief from Ibuza village compliments Nnu Ego by telling her,

*"You are a mother of men, children that made him into a man. If Adakudies today, her people not her husband's will come for her body. It is not so with you."*

(p. 159)

In other words, until Adaku bears sons for Nnaife, she is considered not part of Nnaife's family. This puts the woman in a desperate position to meet these onerous demands on her. Thus, it comes as no surprise as Nnu Ego attempts suicide when she loses her first son.

Similarly, Firdaus' father has no problem whatsoever losing a daughter to death but has issues when he loses a son. Firdaus recounts that when that unfortunate incident happened, her father will vent his anger and pain on her mother. El- Saadawi writes:

*"When one of his female children died, my father would eat his supper, my mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night. When the child that died was a boy, he would beat my mother, then have his supper and lie down to sleep."*

(p. 17)

This suggests that he is unperturbed by the death of a daughter which is revealing of the general societal premium placed on male children. This streams the general obsession of having male children than female ones.

In a sharp contrast, Akobi as portrayed in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, does not display any enthusiasm for male or female children at all. He beats up his wife for getting pregnant as though it is her fault to get pregnant. This is an exception rather than the norm in Africa. This raises our suspicion that Akobi marries Mara for the ulterior motive of turning her into a prostitute and since giving birth to children is likely to disfigure her for the sex work he intends for her, he beats her up for picking a seed.

The female is again discriminated or segregated because culture limits the environs of a woman to the kitchen and thus, patriarchal society does not find it necessary to invest hard-earned income in educating women. Formal education becomes the sole preserve for males. The girls are taught at early stages in their lives to hawk to supplement family budgets. The income accruing thereof is used to support the education of the boys. Nnu Ego confirms this as she tells her female children:

*"But you are girls! They are boys. You have to sell to put them in a good position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family."*

(p. 176)

She works hard with the girls just to see the boys through their education at their own expense. Nnu Ego tries to inculcate into her daughters the general perception of the general society on girls' education.

*A girl needs to master a trade to help her in later life.*

(p. 180)

But the boys are encouraged to put in more efforts into their studies. They should take their "private lessons" seriously so as to occupy enviable positions in later life. Firdaus' case is even pathetic in that, she has had a rare opportunity to go to secondary school. She graduates with a distinction and leaves the school hoping to

work or go to the university with the certificate but her society has no place for an educated woman at that time. Under the circumstances, the best option for her uncle is to marry her off.

Her presence in the uncle's home is very unwelcomed; thus, she has to relocate. Even as a child, Firdaus nurses the ambition of going to El-Azhar University one day to pursue higher education but she learns bitterly that universities are for men only. This is buttressed in the dialogue between Firdaus and her uncle:

*"What will you do in Cairo, Firdaus? I will go to El-Azhar and study like you. Then he would laugh and explain that El-Azhar was only for men."*

(p. 14-15)

Her dream is met with mockery and laughter. This underscores the gender bias society she lives in which favors the males more than the females. In her readings about history, governance and other subjects, she comes to the conclusion that political leaders have all been men but "with distorted personality". She nurses an ambition to break the course of history by becoming a leader or a head of state. But she says:

*"I knew that women did not become heads of state, but I felt..."*

(p. 25)

This shows the place of the women relative to society and the opportunities of education and leadership. She is seen as surrogate to men in society – a second class citizen.

Some religions in Africa allow polygamy which is the act of a man marrying more than one wife. Polygamous men marry more women and that act becomes their source of pride. Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* gives evidence of the Ibuza culture. We can see instances of polygamy with men such as Agbadi and Amatokwu. Nnaife is not left out. Agbadi has many wives but he still chases after Ona as though he has never seen a woman before. Amatokwu, in a desperate attempt to get children into his family, goes in for a second wife. "I cannot fail my people" he tells Nnu Ego. As the new wife comes in, he treats Nnu Ego as though she were a piece of trash. Nnaife by dint of tradition gets a second wife as the Igbo culture permits. He inherits his brother's wives like property bequeathed him. As the women multiply, they tend to compete over the men for attention thereby further reifying the men to the level of "master" or "a god".

Having said that, Akobi, in spite of his journey to the white man's land, still carries some of the remnants of African culture; He marries a white lady, Gitty while he

is still married to Mara. Mara is not surprised when Akobi tells her he has taken a second wife but she is more concerned that he (Akobi) informs her family back home. It is a sign of respect to the in-laws. But he is quick to add:

*Polygamy here is not like polygamy at home. Here, polygamy is a crime- they call bigamy. And I can go to prison for it, you understand? (p.79)*

The point being underscored here is that undoubtedly, polygamy affords the men the opportunity to exploit the women in African society thereby subordinating them.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is also a cultural tool used to subordinate women. It involves cutting or mutilating the clitoris of the females in most African cultures. It is a tradition that is carried out by both women and men in Africa. The main motive for this practice is to diminish the sexual pleasures of the women. This they do in an attempt to make the women humble in terms of their sexuality. The ultimate aim of FGM is to bring the sexuality of the woman under control.

El-Saadawi tells us that as soon as Firdaus' mother discovered her daughter exploring her sexuality with Mahammadain, she brings another woman to perform the operation on her. She writes:

*"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."*

(p. 12)

The practice has become so entrenched that it has become the women's responsibility to ensure that it is carried out. That is why Firdaus' mother helps to perpetrate this painful act on her own daughter. Though it is not explicitly stated in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, it is a well-known fact that Female Genital Mutilation is a practice among the Igbo people. We can thus say Nnu Ego might have undergone this painful act too.

Men's insatiable greed to control women and girls is another element that cannot be left out. A male dominated society continues to reign in Africa. It is an aspect of culture that appears to have been fully established in most African states. The system endorses this male-dominance. This is done either covertly or overtly. El-Saadawi makes this clear as we see Firdaus' uncle's wife addressing her husband as, "*Your holiness*". We find Sheikh Mahmoud supervising Firdaus even as she eats her food. Again, Amatokwu, after getting a second wife, starts desiring lustfully after Nnu Ego on the farm and at other various places until she is fed up and responds.

Mara in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* is worse off. She is so dominated by her husband Akobi that she becomes less than a wife. This she does because her upbringing has taught her so. She says:

*"...after all, mother had taught me that a wife was there for a man for one thing and that was to ensure his well-being, which included pleasure..."*

(p. 13)

Another virtue she learns is:

*"... obey and worship your husband..."*

(p. 13)

Sheikh Mahmoud determines the quantity of food Firdaus should eat otherwise she is beaten. As she runs back to her uncle's house, the only consolation she gets is:

*"A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty is perfect obedience."*

(p. 46-47)

This and other instances place the men at higher positions and the women are only surrogates to the men. The men could do anything to the women and walk away with it with pride and gladness.

Amma puts it thus:

*"Tradition demands that the wife respects, obeys and worships her husband..."*

(p. 13)

Mara also witnesses her father being worshiped as she recounts:

*"I saw my mother worship my father daily..."*

(p. 14)

It is also worrying how men in African societies control and abuse the sexuality of women. The situation is not different whether the women are wives or prostitutes. The men decide when to have affairs with the women. Some forcefully have sex with them which qualifies as a form of marital rape. The women are used as sex objects. Agbadi pounces on Ona in spite of the fact that he is just recovering from his wound.

Sheikh Mahmoud and Firdaus' uncle dominate their wives sexually. Firdaus' uncle tells his wife:

*"You woman, you...What sin, and what prophet? I'm your husband and you're my wife."*

(p 40)

This is in response to her resistance from having an affair as she is not in the mood but he ignores her and goes ahead to sleep with her.

Again, Bayoumi and his friends don't even seek Firdaus' consent before sleeping with her. They practically rape her any time they felt like it. Even her protector, Shareefah cannot protect herself from Fawzy, let alone stand up for Firdaus. A police officer who is supposed to know the law better and enforce it dominates and sleeps with her. Indeed, her body and that of other women in Africa do not belong to themselves but rather are for the men.

Bayoumi who does not live up to his promise to Firdaus ends up intimidating her. He asks her amidst a dirty slap:

*"How dare you raise your voice when you're speaking to me, You street walker, you low woman?"*

(p 52)

The woman is not supposed to speak while the man speaks. The situation is none the worse with Mara and her husband Akobi. He sleeps with her on the mattress but after he has satisfied himself with her, he drives her with away to sleep on the hard floor. The manner in which he sleeps with her has nothing to do with her feelings as a human being. Again, The Joys of Motherhood lies in her ability to bear children but Akobi in order to avoid impregnating her withdraws his manhood and discharges on her body. Quite disgusting!

By way of summary, as can be lucidly inferred from the discussion made in this essay, female subjugation is very dominant in African novels. Cultural practices such as polygamy, the role of women as sex tools and commodities and female genital mutilation stand out tall as a major contributor to the subjugation of women. Female characters in such novels usually become passive while a few use various forms of escapisms to free themselves from subordination and oppression and these writers project their voices and cries in their novels. It is therefore concluded that female subordination is at the detriment of women and the society; therefore, this cultural acts should be discouraged and completely eliminated.

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