

GENDER RELATIONS IN BEN OKRI'S TRILOGY:
THE FAMISHED ROAD, SONGS OF
ENCHANTMENT AND INFINITE RICHES //

UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI
EAST AFRICANA COLLECTION

BY
JOHN WAFULA

University of NAIROBI Library



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DECLARATION

This is my original work and has not been presented for a degree to any University.



.....
JOHN WAFULA.

This thesis has been submitted for examination with my approval as University supervisor.



.....
Dr. D. H. KIIRU.

DEDICATION

I desire that this work immortalises my parents, Musa Wafula Enock and Martha Wafula Namage, and the whole Wafula family, for their unexampled love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My abiding thanks to my brother-in-law, Philip Wekesa, and my sister, Grace Wekesa for their unaffected material and moral sympathy.

My unqualified gratitude goes to my supervisor, Dr. D. H. Kiiru, for supervision and patience.

My special thanks to my teachers Prof. Ciarunji Chesaina, Prof. Henry Indangasi, Prof. Wanjiku Mukabi Kabira, Prof. Monica Mweseli, Prof. Hellen Mwanzi, Dr. Fred Matiang'i and Dr. Senorina Wendo.

I profoundly thank Dr. Evan Mwangi for having incomparably resourced this research and Dr. Peter Wasamba for the compassionate attention.

My humble gratitude to Ephraim Imaya, Chris Wasike, Kimingichi Wabende, Anthony Kirimi, Maureen Ndumba, Elias Ng'ang'a, and George Nyandoro for friendship and inspiration.

My classmates, Margaret Wanjiku and Rose Mueni, gave me the best of both worlds and I will never thank you enough.

My thanks to Omukoba Sibabi and Eliud Wakwabubi for brotherly support and encouragement.

The painstaking support and love of Peninah Mumbua Mwanzia beggars my words.

I am indebted to Ben Okri for the sublime vision and scintillating grace of his works.

To all these people, and those whose pardon I crave for not having found words to express my thanks, I dedicate the sagacious words of Sir Isaac Newton: If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of the giants.

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Ben Okri's exposition of gender relations in three interrelated novels: The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, and Infinite Riches. The premise of the study is the elision of the woman's experience from the writing of the male African prose artist and the paucity of critical output on Okri as an artist who contests gender positions. The underlying objectives of this study are to show that Okri mirrors men and women in their existential reality and proposes revised gender positions. This study is informed by the sociological and feminist theoretical postulations. Library research guides the study in the area of methodology.

The study basically takes a thematic approach that focuses on the womanhood trope, patriarchal relations and new images and consciousness as areas of exegetical interest. Under the womanhood trope the study presents portraits that typify the perception of women in society and have gender as the inflected ideology. This study discusses experiences such as motherhood, marriage, violence, the individuality of women, and impediments that women encounter in their aspiration to bond together.

This study examines patriarchal relations in order bring to the fore the imaging of men in social engagements contingent upon the presence of women. The study encompasses issues such as the male-child's reciprocation of maternity, patriarchy and masculinity as reference points in social relations, and the place of defiant femininity.

The study finally explores what is articulated in the trilogy as the basis for reconstructing gender relations. The discussion evaluates the revision and

development in the consciousness of both male and female characters. Here the study looks at how men and women adjust to their domestic roles, individual character, and role in public life.

The study concludes that Okri has portrayed men and women in their social positions realistically. This study also establishes that Okri proposes a redrawing of gender positions with the aim of advocating equality and social justice. Finally, the study suggests perspectives beneficial to future research on Okri as an African literary artist.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This study is an inquiry into the depiction of gender relations in three interrelated novels by Ben Okri: The Famished Road (1991), Songs of Enchantment (1993), and Infinite Riches (1998). The triangulation of the novels into a trilogy is achieved through characterisation, thematic continuity and style. Characters such as Mum, Dad, Madame Koto and Azaro, the narrator-cum-protagonist spirit-child, span the length of the trilogy, bringing out concerns that are amenable to a gender centred exegesis.

Okri is a prolific novelist among African writers of the second generation, having written prose (the novel and the short story), poetry, and the literary essay. His novels are Flowers and Shadows (1980), The Landscapes Within (1981), The Famished Road (1991), the book that won the 1991 Booker Prize, Songs of Enchantment (1993), a sequel to The Famished Road, Astonishing the Gods (1995), Dangerous Love (1996), a reworked version of The Landscapes Within, Infinite Riches (1998), so far the last book that presents characterisation, setting and style that permeate The Famished Road and Songs of Enchantment and In Arcadia (2000). His poetry collection has been published under An African Elegy (1992) and the epic poem, Mental Fight (1999). Okri's literary essays have been published as Birds of Heaven (1996) and A Way of Being Free (1999). Besides winning the Booker Prize in 1991, Okri has also won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Africa and the Paris Review Agakhan Prize for Fiction, among others.

The Famished Road exploits the abiku folklore of the Nigerian society. The novel presents the story of Azaro, a spirit-child (abiku), who is also the narrator. Azaro experiences a cyclic process of birth and death like other spirit-children who dislike the world of the living but finally decides to stay so as to spare his mother the pain of parturition. His story is therefore an account of experiences in the world of the living and the interspaces, supposedly inhabited by the dead. His companions, in the world of the dead, attempt to lure him back but he fights to remain among the living. His experiences in the world of the living revolve around his parents, Dad and Mum, and Madame Koto.

The story that Azaro narrates evolves against the backdrop of a nation caught in the throes of social and political change. Indeed the abiku child and the lives of most characters are a metaphorical representation of a nation's process of death and rebirth in political ideology and aspiration. He narrates the story from the first person point of view.

In Songs of Enchantment, the sequel to The Famished Road, Azaro is more of a narrator than the main character around whom the story is built. The story is about Dad's involvement with Helen, a beggar girl, and his lofty aspirations, like building a school for the beggars. Mum learns of Dad's passion for Helen and deserts him. Helen and the beggars also reject him when violence breaks out at Sami's betting shop.

When Dad fails to get Helen, he goes back to rebuild his relationship with Mum. He finds her at Madame Koto's house but he cannot regain her easily. He resigns to

undertaking domestic chores as a way of reconciling with Mum. His ensuing struggle with Madame Koto over Mum leads to his physical blindness. Paradoxically, Dad's blindness heralds a heightened vision of reality.

Infinite Riches concludes the trilogy. Dad is arrested for the murder of the carpenter and imprisoned in an unknown place. Consequently, Mum mobilises fellow women dwelling in the slums to search for him. When Dad finally arrives home, he refuses the heroic identity foisted on him and instead puts Mum in the limelight of true achievement.

The rest of this novel revolves around the disintegration of Madame Koto's myth. The Party of the Rich plans a major rally in which Madame Koto plays a central role. Unfortunately for her, the rally degenerates into an orgy of violence during which she is stabbed to death. Women, whom Madame Koto helped to elevate socially and economically, come in large numbers to mourn and bury her as a great matriarch. Mum is one of the women.

Like many African writers who intelligibly treat African fiction as a social statement and a means of political reawakening, Okri has written works true to reality and at the same time complete in artistic sensibility. Killam and Rowe have observed that, "Okri translates his remarkable knowledge of African cultures into a rich array of images and symbols" (198). The study examines gender relations in his three novels because of this aesthetic and didactic achievement. Okri is also a male African author who focuses on the experience of men and women in order to underpin social justice irrespective of gender.

In the context of the dominant critical persuasion(s) in literary discourse, the study's interest in Okri's writings is necessitated by the scanty attention that women and male novelists with a visible concern for gender in literary discourse attract. In other words, this study could advance the inclusion of gender perspectives in literary discourse since the presumption is that the writer decidedly embraces in his three novels the question of being male and female.

The concern of this study is to search for a redefinition of the literary sensibility of the male African prose artist and his appreciation of issues intrinsic to gender in literature. The African male novelist has been often indicted of elision in his recognition of the woman's unique experience as he foregrounds the man's situation. The male writer in the African literary tradition is said to be prone to stereotypical summations and recourse to techniques that hamper the promise of positive images of gender relations. As an explanation, the African male writer is characterised as being inherently constrained and inaccurate in his conception of subjects that are quintessentially gender specific because of innate patriarchy and essentialist socialisation. However the nexus between the African male novelist and definitive feminism is yet to elicit in-depth scholarship. Yet it is necessarily within the onus of the critic of African literature to guide the writer toward expedient approaches to gender relations in literature.

Thus it is not fortuitous that this study delves into the work of an African male writer in an unprecedented context. More importantly, Okri clearly occupies a determinative presence in the growing corpus of literature associated with the second generation of African novelists. The corpus of critical output on Okri has indeed been incomparably

expansive. Distinctly, however, much of the criticism nucleates around political topics and his narrative experimentation as a postmodernist. The gap that should be examined, therefore, is the tone of his acknowledgement of gender as a major component of the emergent literary trend in Africa. This study seeks to establish how the novelist confronts motifs like marriage, polygamy, motherhood and gendered variables suffused in power relations in society. At the same time the study appraises the writer's approach to gender relations and if it is in any way different from, or the same as the leanings of other male and female writers.

Rarely has criticism treated male writers who profess gender ideals as worthy of forceful analysis. Where exceptions emerge, the predictable tendency is to invalidate the specificity of a gender aesthetic and elevate interest in universalistic critical apparatus, whose subtle grounding is in the normative claims of a bigoted male culture. Thus the critical enterprise must be witnessing an erasure of that trajectory of elements whose sociological basis articulates a reality estranged from patriarchal proclivities.

More to the point, Okri is an artist whose complex and seamless sensibilities cannot accede to straightjacketed literary criticism. His cognitive versatility is transcendental yet little, if any, has been written on his treatment of gender as a site for social re-apprehension and progress. It befits literary criticism to inquire into Okri's consciousness on gendered literary perspectives and the kind of new idiom that he suggests.

This study is further anchored by E.M Forster's postulations in Aspects of the Novel. Forster observes that the structuring components of prose fiction are the story, people and the plot. These compositional devices provide a framework for the study since an analysis of gender relations focuses on people as carriers of the action in the story. By and large, this study is unique in respect of the foregoing but again it should stimulate abiding discursive interest in gender from the standpoint of the male African writer.

This study is to establish that the perception of gender relations that the writer inspires is in credible correlation with the reality experienced in the non-fiction realm. In other words, this study is to show that Okri explores and portrays women and men against the backdrop of social reality. The study is also an assessment of the degree to which it is manifest that the writer promulgates a new vantage point in his handling of womanhood and patriarchal constructs in society. The study is also to investigate what Okri purveys as new paradigms in redefining gender relations.

This study contends that Okri embraces goals in his trilogy that objectively produce visages of men and women in their experiential situation. He consciously brings to the fore sentiments demonstrative of gender relations and utilises his casting of male and female characters in the trilogy as a symbolic articulation. The study further postulates that womanhood and patriarchy are interlocked in a dialectical relationship whose outcome intends to put them on a new plane in society. In this case the new matrix is the redefinition of womanhood and patriarchy beyond the prescribed domains.

This study will limit itself to the three novels that constitute the trilogy: The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment and Infinite Riches. These texts consistently feature gender relations in a revolutionary tone. The study shall also make reference to secondary sources of information, depending on their relevance to the research.

The nature of this study, which explores gender relations as a textual subject, sanctions duality in theoretical alignment. The sociological theory is apposite since the study is to inquire into identities attendant to womanhood and patriarchy in society. Theoretical issues typifying this school of thought are buttressed in the triad of the artist, language and society. Rene and Wellek have posited that, "Literature is a social institution using as its medium language, a social creation" (94). In other words, literary discourse is imbued with conventionalised social signals. Wheale observes that, "Language in itself is the most formidable determining institution, followed by gender, class and culture, which are themselves mediated exclusively through language" (192). The experience of the artist alone cannot manipulate images contrived and relayed through language. Correspondence with the reflected real must be evident and in proximity to the philosophy of society. This supplants arbitrariness and renders literature an animation of socially shared truths.

The process of semiotic permutations through language allows the writer to implant in his output a coded configuration of meanings that relay social dispositions. Webster argues that, "literature is primarily about individuals who represent universal qualities common or potentially common to all men--and presumably women--irrespective of their social and economic position" (56). In this regard, a writer draws characters and guides their fictional intercourse so as to capture the countenance of

society. Hence the sociological theory is valid since it underscores the writer's loci in society as the equivalent of a moral precept set against society's profound individual and collective being. Mugubi stresses this sociological aim on the part of a writer:

There is no imaginative writer worth his salt and who by the nature of his vocation is not a critic of the society, portrayer of dynamic social change, a mediator between conflicting ideas of the society; a moral guide and a social philosopher, can avoid the burning issues of the day, for literature, to the extent that it is a mirror of man's nature, must reflect social reality or at least certain aspects of social reality. (22)

Literature should unite the writer with society in a process of reflection and comprehension. The writer prods society into self-conception, whose purpose is to positively rename social and cultural symbols and move out of the stifling present. Achebe says, "The writer cannot be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front. For he is after all the sensitive point of his community" (29). Where the society anticipates social and moral enlightenment through artistic persuasion, the writer becomes its mirror and critic. The study is to establish if Okri has fulfilled the role of a writer as encompassed in the sociological framework.

Okri is antithetical to the subordination of literature to a purely art for art's sake application. He says, "The poet is not a creator but an alchemist. Poets are helplessly on the side of the greatest, the highest causes, the most just future" (Being Free 6). This humanising of the poet should preordain a literature whose moral insight enlightens society irrespective of gender. Okri aspires to accomplish this and as a writer he can therefore not be distanced from the sociological path, nor excised from

the totality that nourishes his perceptiveness. He pronounces a personal philosophy but as a synthesis of dialectical phenomena that seek to nurture a newness in society.

Yet integral as it is, the sociological model alone cannot sufficiently found the strength of a study investigating gender relations in the writing of a male novelist. What pretensions to objectivity cannot obscure here is the latent suspicion that sociological frames are amenable to dictates of patriarchy. Language, as the intermediary curtain between the writer and society, is layered with undertones of patriarchal references that weaken its impartiality. As such the exchange of influences between the writer and society is narrowed down to the hegemony of male-centred views. To impede such masculinist bias, this study shall, besides the sociological compass, utilise feminist theoretical apparatus as a tool for literary analysis. Indeed this is ineluctable, considering the inclusion of the womanhood trope in our core thematic contention.

One readily recognisable feature of feminism is the quality of heterogeneity. Unlike other integrated literary theories, feminism disintegrates into variants that account for its eclectic composition. Webster states that, "it would be dangerous to characterize feminist theory as a unified discourse: by its nature most feminist writing tries to eschew a singular, centralized vision for a more plural and de-centred range of approaches. It would be more appropriate in this context to talk of feminisms" (75).

The factoring of gender into criticism can be deduced from this postulation. The concern with texts written by male authors (androtxts) and the attempt to circumscribe them within a female rubric has been cited as the point of departure in

feminist criticism. This is the image of women tradition, which explicates how literature mirrors the female character. The central concern here is for the critic to determine how female characters are presented in literature. Donovan observes that, "Usually the critic discovers that the images are Other, and therefore that the literature is alien" (264). This branch of feminism is then the niche that "socio-feminists" (Ruthven 19) study because the presentation in literary texts zeroes in on women and their position in society. The presumed rationale that buttresses socio-feminists is that "both femininity and masculinity are socially constructed and invested with various qualities, names, images and narratives which constantly circulate in society and which shape and determine people's attitudes and lives" (Webster 72).

Texts by women writers (gynotexts) and their correspondence with male authored writings have been the basis of gynocriticism, a feminist dimension that Elaine Showalter propounds to support disengagement with the school of thought of women's images. According to Showalter, reading androtexs in approval of socio-feminism is an inherently patriarchal engagement since it popularises male views of women at the expense of initiating a female baseline in criticism. To obviate the one-sidedness of a discourse controlled by the exemplification of patriarchy, gynocriticism advocated "the feminist study of women's writing, including readings of women's texts and analyses of the intertextual relations both between women writers (a female literary tradition), and between women and men" (Showalter 189). The ubiquity of gender in literary discourse is thus undeniable because of the intratextual and intertextual gender exchanges.

Studying Okri in this critical context is hence feasible as it can expound on the presence of the gender argument in the author's consciousness. Ideally, gynocriticism intertwines with socio-feminism to broaden the theoretical reference such that the study espouses both images of womanhood and patriarchy in a male writer's environment. More so, the female ideology celebrated under the two major feminist approaches provides the mooring for picturing and studying the literary explication of gender in an African context. "For African feminism unlike Western feminism does not negate men rather it accommodates them" (Chukwama 131). In all, the feminist theory makes up for particularities that the nonspecific sociological model is bound to gloss over.

Asked about his audience as a writer, Okri responded that, "everything you write, the way you write, answers that question" (Wilkinson 81). The novelist sees unity in the material of his subject and the medium of transmission. Language and the load that it carries are in other words crucial to an effective reading of Okri. The encoding system of his universe and the loaded details are therefore central to understanding the interrelationships that depict gender in the trilogy.

Okri's language is attuned to the expansive vibrations of a surfeit imagination that procures the transmogrification of reality by abolishing divisions of time and space. He says, "a language inhabits you; if you know the language well enough and you know your feelings strongly enough about your art and about life you can get any language to say what you want to say" (82). And since he has a primeval hold on his world, Okri infuses images of being, myths, riddles, parables and symbols of life, continuity and its denial into his language.

The progression is therefore from language to historical reality where the gender discourse bears verisimilitude. This is the tenor of the trilogy, the genesis being The Famished Road, which then pervasively penetrates and links with the other two novels as the gender relationships coalesce into thematic standpoints. Beginning the study from this point is thus instructive since the linguistic and stylistic arrangements within the text can then be exploded to decipher the underlying gender relationships. Yet still the study should not be rigidly restricted to what the author has said in the interview.

The Companion to African Literature offers bibliographical notes on Okri and a brief survey of his writings. The reviewers acknowledge the centrality of Okri in African literature and underscore his concern about the African political and economic reality. They evaluate Okri as a writer whose interest in the supernatural predicates his grasp of reality and how he seeks to refigure it. His style is “simple, lucid, and image-laden, ensuring easy communication” (Killam and Rowe 198). They observe that the diction of The Famished Road is linked to the author’s view of the world and couched in a language that is “generally poetic, incantatory, and descriptive, evoking the books of John in the New Testament in the first paragraphs” (198). Nonetheless this analysis remains too brief and journalistic in approach to suffice in comprehending Okri’s expansive world outlook. The reviewers have discussed only one book, which leaves out the other two that are vital to the process of linkage in the trilogy. The survey lacks literary depth and has no critical interest in gender relations as this study attempts to do.

This study is indebted to Kiiru's "The Woman's Role in Alex La Guma's Fiction," an unpublished thesis, both from a theoretical point of view and the indubitable fact that it is a seminal study on the writings of a male African author. Essentially, the frameworks within which the critic appraises the woman character in La Guma's fiction are broad and cogently informed by the feminist theoretical orientation. Again, Kiiru acknowledges the "topicality of gender in literature" (2) and goes further to authoritatively interrogate the literariness of the ideological progenitor of feminism, arguing that it is "extraneous to literature as it is dominated by the polemics of gender politics, female empowerment, gender sensitivity or affirmative action" (15). Hence the critic considers the "moral content" of La Guma's works alongside feminist standpoints.

The areas in which Kiiru places the significance of La Guma's woman character are the romantic role, the maternal role, the occupational role, the marital role, the political role and the woman's function as the aesthetic ideal. In keeping with the stated objectives of this research, the maternal, marital and political roles are in particular necessary reference points. For instance, Kiiru sees procreation, nurturing and moral guidance as constitutive imperatives of the maternal role. "At the same time they show that the mother is an enduring presence in offspring bearing and a symbol of social change" (19). These are issues that the study seeks to examine as benchmarks of gender relations in the trilogy.

Pertinently, however, South African literature has evolved within its own social and political paradigms that should not be overlooked in a literary context. There certainly exist contradistinctions between the West African social-political reality where Okri

situates his images of men and women and the South African experience that La Guma expostulates both as a committed writer and as a socialist realist. For instance, South African literature has been criticised for neglecting aesthetic concerns in favour of almost journalistic or propagandistic content. Of course La Guma shuns this but his literary experience and presentation of social phenomena remains differentiated from the corpus of Okri's artistic thrust in ideology and critical stance.

Quayson's essay, "Protocols of Representation and the Problems of Constituting an African 'Gnosis': Achebe and Okri" explicates realism vis-à-vis magic and the supernatural in an African literary tradition. The critic's elucidation of these modes of artistic narration is linked to postcolonial theory and the likely markers that would assert an African epistemological consciousness. Quayson argues that traditional narrative compositions embody the magical and supernatural, which are revealed through metamorphoses, the presence of super human beings and that the two lack a credible causality inherent in the supernatural tales. Realism is established as "a mode of fictional representation that gives the illusion of the real world as experienced by the readers" (141). He continues that the major qualities of differentiation revolve around the style of characterisation, the nature of causality and the relationship between natural setting and characters. In Things Fall Apart, Achebe has then involved realism whereas Okri aligns to magic and the supernatural in The Famished Road. This examination and categorisation of Okri's narrative mode will buttress our study in identifying gender images where realism has been extended into the mythic. The critic does not however illuminate how sentiments about gender are appropriated within postcolonial divisions in representation. He does not explain how Okri's mythopoeia brings about suggestions of the encounter between male and female

values. This study should penetrate beyond the mythopoeic and indicate the embedded gender images.

In “Intertextuality and Post-Colonial Literature in Ben Okri’s The Famished Road” Olatubosun Ogunsanwo considers the narrative revolution of substituting the solely realist narrative technique with intertextuality. The critic discerns in the text a narrative multiplicity, intermingling of narrative traditions without disrupting their equilibrium in discourse connectivity. Ogunsanwo argues that The Famished Road has a cohering of multiple narrative strands whose impact on the text is the creation of “cultural interdiscursivity” (41). Accordingly, the cultural communalism of the text is synthesised through the confluencing of the European realist plane of representation and the mythic kind that is affiliated to the African essence of perception. This then generates the postmodernist character of the novel since the concession to use multiple but harmonised narrative voices proclaims withdrawal from the Eurocentric primacy of the master narrative. As a result, he argues, the novel is assimilated within the postcolonial literary temperament as “neo-traditional art” (42) whose aesthetic choices move along the re-ordering of tradition in line with the lessons of colonialism. Ogunsanwo sees Azaro, the narrator-protagonist in The Famished Road, as the regulating device that influences the intertextuality by vacillating plausibly between realist and mythic texts. This innovation challenges the hegemonistic hierarchy of narrative schemes based on the distribution of discourse elements from the realist core towards the mythic periphery. As such the critic observes in the text the “decolonisation of African literature without throwing overboard the European mode of narration” (45).

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On the basis of this seminal exposition, the study should be able to examine gender relations without being disadvantaged by the alternating, simultaneous or single narrative techniques. Although the critic focuses principally on The Famished Road, other novels that constitute the trilogy would still admit to the applicability of the argument owing to Okri's consistence in style. Nevertheless, Ogunsanwo's approach pre-empts absolute fidelity due to the dominance of style in his criticism. This study should consider form-oriented benchmarks but be centred on characterisation and the encapsulated themes.

Hawley's "Ben Okri's Spirit Child: Abiku Migration and Postmodernity" invaluable supports this study in comprehending the strategy of abiku as apparatus for decoding meanings inflected by gender within the text. Hawley attributes Azaro's ability to transform into a recipient of action and further as the mediating link between realist and mythic realms that intertwine and co-exist within the text to the narrator's mythopoeic nature. Comprehending the status of Azaro's as a deconstructed and redesigned folkloristic abiku insertion into the textual exchanges therefore produces concreteness in looking at other characters. Accordingly, the abiku lore is an epistemological remembrance, initially domiciled in orality but now textualised to refute historical denials of the African episteme. Hawley argues that cast in the abiku spirit form, Azaro plays a role beyond the single interest in "intensifying powers of observation" (31). He further intimates that through the textual fluidity of the abiku spirit-child the African aesthetic benefits by moving "African literature closer to the postmodern movement" (31). Comparing the youthful character in The Landscapes Within, Omovo, and Azaro, Hawley observes that the former seeks to reflect his self through an organised and systematic universe unlike the latter's postmodern

symmetry, “one that pays comparatively little attention to space and floats in a transcultural synchronicity” (35). Hence as part of the narrative combinations embedded in the text, the abiku introduces a mindset of hybridity that announces the postcolonial. Nevertheless, Hawley’s critical delivery concentrates on the narrator-cum-protagonist without responding to the subject of how the abiku construct determines Azaro’s interaction with other forms of characterisation within the trilogy and the effect on gender relations.

Nyairo analyses the quintessentially more psychical than realist presentation in Okri’s Astonishing the Gods on the basis of characterisation and setting. She asserts that Okri’s fiction is unified by aesthetic particularities that deflect it from the path of traditional realism. She predicates the proximity of Okri’s formal commitment to surrealism rather than magic realism on the attributes of characterisation and setting in Astonishing the Gods, which she says are circumscribed within aesthetic references that lack replication in the realist sense. She writes:

A reading of Okri’s *Astonishing the Gods* using the tenets of magical realism is, however, rendered untenable by the fact that there is nothing in this novel that is remotely realistic. In the event, we must read Okri here as a master of surrealism. Surrealism is, indeed, crucial to our interpretation here since within the novel we cannot recognise any representation of the real or social world. As against the so-called real world, there is complete disorientation here: places have no names and people have no faces. (22)

To achieve characterisation and setting in Astonishing the Gods, Nyairo argues, Okri deviates from the realist practice of splitting the two through a “subtle

merging...since characterisation is grounded on a de-centered notion of subjectivity in which the essence of a character can be detached and projected outwards to influence the environment" (22). She sees such a form of representation as validating the African ontological system that recognises the indivisible continuity between the graspable physical and the impalpable spiritual world. According to her, characters in Astonishing the Gods lose specificity in their association with the physical world as a result of being moulded in a form that transforms them at will. She observes that in Astonishing the Gods the setting does not precede characterisation but rather occurs simultaneously as a conjuration of the protagonist's mind. Thus there is a fusion of setting and characterisation that separate when the character envisages the surrounding. Notwithstanding the journalistic brevity of the critique, Nyairo's views are eminent in ascertaining Okri's unique presentation of characterisation as an aspect of form. In particular, Nyairo's interpretation of the fluidity of characters in Astonishing the Gods provides this study with a credible understanding of the relations among characters in the trilogy, against the backdrop of magic realism.

In "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial Narrative" Elleke Boehmer categorises Okri among writers like Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh whose representation of identities of the nation pictures the split character of the nation. "The nation is then regarded not so much than as an ideal, an essential and necessary good, as an in part imaginary composition" (274). Boehmer proceeds that in these kinds of representation what emerges, as the discernible national outlook, is the unpredictable history of the nation. This symbolism is supposedly encapsulated in the violated state of the body as contained in the postcolonial narrative. She says, "When national histories are revealed as stochastic, divided, painful, where origins are

obscure, the body, too, is exposed as fissured, reduced” (274). Boehmer sees one method of achieving this portrayal of the national assemblage as “figuration or transfiguration, the translation of signs and metaphors into an other, more self-directed system of signs, usually one that is diachronic, narrative” (275). She alludes to magic realism and how its dissolution of borderlines multiplies symbols that outline the particularity of desired images. However gendered discourse is prominent in the postcolonial narrative yet the critic overlooks reference to its significance in the national milieu. Further the narrative in The Famished Road gains significance in Songs of Enchantment and Infinite Riches which Boehmer does not discuss. The aim of this research is to analyse the three novels as one complete whole and focus on aspects of representation that centre on the dialectics of gender.

In “Ben Okri” Harry Garuba comes up with emblematic aspects of content and artistic design characteristic of Okri’s short stories, novels and verse. Placing the writer within the second generation of Nigerian novelists, Garuba describes the consistent direction of Okri’s works as the unbroken predilection towards “the socio-economic landscape of postindependence and post-civil war Nigeria and its impingement on the lives and circumstances of individuals caught in this historical cauldron.... Encompassed in this broad Okri landscape are the themes of innocence, experience, corruption, power and powerlessness” (277-78). Garuba intimates that these recurrent thematic areas are communicated through amorphous or disfigured states of mind and “the dissolution of objective experience into subjectivity, endless transition and metamorphosis” (278). Put differently, the critic admits to the social relevance of Okri’s writings that is disseminated through subjective observation. In the case of The Famished Road, Garuba likens the phenomenon of the abiku’s

mythological transience to a “parable of migrancy, transition and metamorphosis” (282). This is predicated on Azaro’s unbounded linkages with the spirit world and magical humanoid beings that allow for infinitude, casting the narrator’s physical substance as an elastic form that seeps through and remoulds in equally unrestricted spatial and temporal settings.

Garuba discusses Songs of Enchantment along similar benchmarks. He sees objective visualisation being refracted through transmuted visages in the life of the spirit-child and a host of other phantasmagoric forms. In effect, the delineation of gender in the trilogy should traverse both subjective and objective reality. However Garuba examines Okri’s thematic leanings at the general level of the reflected sociality without looking at the embodied specifics like those that appertain to gender. Furthermore, the writing of Infinite Riches renders Garuba’s survey of the two books incomplete. As an extension of the allegory of the abiku, Infinite Riches expands the earlier two novels outside the appreciation delivered by Garuba. The three novels conjunct interrelated aspects that ought to be approached as an undivided whole.

In “A History of Interruptions: Dislocated Mimesis in the Writings of Neil Bissondath and Ben Okri” David Richards observes reversals, negations and markers of diversity in the portrait of postcolonial sociality. Accordingly, textuality is a site for stating social engagement, transference of the historical real into the constitution of fictive textuality. He says that the “post colonial subject” (74) is deposited with tensions, rebuttals and dislocations precipitated by the social condition of identities occasioned through multiple variations. He continues that, “What I mean by that is the host of social practices, which constitute the fabric of social experience: in that respect the

social text is the antithesis of ethnography, which transforms social experience into disciplinary objects of knowledge” (74). The writings of Bissondath and Okri are thus planes of reality, the indrawn entities deriving their interactive inspiration from the inherent social meanings. The critic sees Okri and Bissondath as turning to the mutilated social body of the post-colonial to force an “objectifying confrontation with a world of misrepresentation; and these terrible images are heavily laden with political significance as social bodies, as social texts” (78).

It is mainly the dispersal of spatial locations, the dissolution of finite time and the institution of myth that Richards explores in the works of Bissondath. On the other hand, the critic evasively treats Okri’s symbolic fragmentation of the whole as a strategy for asserting its essentiality. Richards conspicuously opts to gloss over a veritable articulation of postcolonial images and gendered sentiments in “A Hidden History”. This is clearly an account of black emigrants whose enthusiastic arrival in a European city, their being rejected and eventual eviction confutes the falsity of altruistic colonial hegemony. For to disown history, and prevent the movement of the past into the present, equates with resisting the elimination of postcolonial otherness. A dislocated mimesis therefore discredits artificial history through an elocutionary force that restitutes social images.

Building on the foregoing, the exhumed parts of the black female body in “A Hidden History” become a concrete historical statement and a valid representation of social phenomena. The narrator says:

Then he brought out the head of a black woman, roughly hacked, the eyes open and bloated, the nose cut like harelip that had repeated itself. He brought

them out smiling, listening, thorough in his investigation. He was drawn by the temptations to list...the List-maker tried to fit the pieces of the woman's body into a remembered shape. (89-90)

Richards interprets such a drawing as the opening up of an inert exterior so as to disclose the "spirit or soul" (78) beneath. And when freed from mortal encasement, the specificity of social reality does not affect the immortal. It advances to a sphere of neutrality in time and space.

That the dismembered parts are of a black woman is clearly symbolic. Here black womanhood incarnates both the negritudist aesthetic and the unending creative potential of the black race. The cutting up and concealment of the female body parallels the dislocation and covering up of social accounts in the experience of blacks. The resilience of black history resides in the fecundity of womanhood and there is therefore strength for continuity even when disrupted and negated. Richards should have seen in this portrait Okri's aversion to the violent affliction enamoured of womanhood in society since the severed body parts confirm unnatural termination of the female essence. Being cognisant of gender consciousness, this study overcomes such flaws in the analysis of the trilogy by not just discussing social violence but also associating it with gender implications.

Richards also examines Okri's "Laughter Beneath the Bridge" as a story that evokes dislocated mimesis. His intimation is that the story constructs a "tragic-ritual shape" (78), which the author uses to vilify social sentiments. Monica, the young girl who dominates the narrative, evokes the fate of innocent womanhood as a placatory visor in the event of society's disharmony with the supernatural. The social injustice that

women in traditionalist patrilineal set-ups suffer is certainly the object of this denunciation. "The egungun played a role in traditional society which was revered and regulatory; the egungun was the receiver of sacrifice, not the sacrifice; the story therefore enacts a travesty of the past, the destruction of the ancestral links with the world of the dead" (79). The fractured mask that Monica wears is both a show of diminishment in the veneration of the past and a preview of dissonance in society. This imagery gains depth when a soldier irreverently unmask the girl, exposing the egungun. The penalty is death and hence more tragedy in society. Richards says, "Thereafter, the community has lost its ability to grasp its meaning" (79).

However, Richards omits from his analysis the role of gender in subverting tradition. By acting the egungun, Monica confronts stereotypical beliefs with her womanhood, questioning the patriarchal exclusiveness of the ancestral universe. It is an inverted enactment whereby the victim as expected under tradition, rejects customary fate and applies the objects of her would be tragic destiny to the annihilation of anti-female mythology.

Ogude in Ngugi's Novels and African History: Narrating the Nation articulates a feminist perspective that is beneficial to this study by reading images of women in Ngugi's novels as allegorical constructs. Accordingly, the relationships into which Ngugi's women are drawn progress under the mien of romance but in essence they are representations of nationhood. The critic argues that Ngugi uses allegory in most of his works to explore romantic relationships as symbolic representations of what takes place in the wider society. "His female archetypes are quite similar to the extent that they become sites for contesting the desired nation" (109). Thus Ngugi's initial

thrust is to portray women under ethnicity as a microcosm of the nation. In The River Between and Weep Not, Child, the critic sees Ngugi's women and the ethos of the tribe as a miniaturised display of the national scene: "The portrayal of the tribe as an organic whole and Ngugi's gesture towards a reconciled nationhood are mediated by women" (110). He interprets the romantic relationship between Mumbi and Gikonyo in A Grain of Wheat as being revelatory of national reconciliation, renewal and optimism. Elsewhere in the novels women and relationships in which they find themselves are viewed as markers of social contours: "Romantic relations between the rich and the poor, Ngugi would then seem to suggest, have no social legitimacy and are doomed from the start by the antagonistic and contradictory relations of exploitation between these two broad social groups" (113). Examples are the pairing of Wanjia and Kimeria, Wariinga and Gatuiria. Through these relationships, Ogude argues. Ngugi intimates that it is only the propertied class and not patriarchy and its institutions that oppress women. These are sound arguments that steer the study toward a delineation of women in fiction that is not hinged on the polemics of the class struggle. Ogude, though, adheres to a postcolonial feminist reading that significantly differs from parameters that obtain in gender readings.

Lauretta Ngcobo in "African Motherhood--Myth and Reality" decries the ambiguity that characterises the normative circumstances of motherhood against the background of moral and cultural ideals in African societies. Her position is that motherhood is essentially undefined due to assumptions that are neither consistent nor standard determinants of the demands placed upon women in their roles as mothers. Accordingly, the inconstancy is such that at one level motherhood is a venerated social locale yet, on the contrary, women who have to struggle under the onus of

motherhood in Africa find the social identity hollow and tragic. Motherhood, as the leeward side of womanhood, is hence a spurious baptism meant to relieve the insidious subsumation of the woman's identity in African societies.

Procreation, as the condition for society's self-perpetuation and continuity, is basically the consideration that explains the indispensability of African women. African motherhood is about children. She says, "Every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full" (141). Institutions such as marriage, into which women are initiated, are for the convenience of transferring "a woman's fertility to the husband's family group" (141). Ngcobo observes that after ascertaining a woman's fecundity, customary practices are exacted in order for her role to be rendered obligatory. She says that after dowry has been paid the woman can neither break off the marriage nor abdicate her prescribed social responsibility of procreation.

The critic argues that, "The major weakness in this formidable role of motherhood is that women can only exercise it from the outside, for they remain marginalised at their new husband's home" (143). She continues that, believed to be necessary for socialising especially young women into the status of motherhood, taboos and generally alienating observances are always to be erected about them. Ngcobo says that submission to the husband's community and the man himself bestows upon the woman the "honour" of approval and respect. She observes that a wilful woman may find herself entangled in accusations of witchcraft and even infidelity. She asserts that childlessness and old age excite similar revulsion. In a marriage where children are not forthcoming, even when the defect is on the side of the man, the critic posits, the

woman is held accountable and made to carry the accompanying social stigma. Accordingly, the fate of old age is either mindless neglect or stigmatised as malevolence in society although old age and widowhood are occasionally venerated. She concludes that, "It is from this vantage that a lot of books written by male writers see the women of Africa propped high on a pedestal of power, virtue and conformity, and well loved" (149). Similarly, Chukwama says:

The female character in African fiction hitherto is a facile lacklustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home she is not part of the decision making both as a daughter, wife and mother, even when the decisions affect her directly. Docility and complete subsumation of will is demanded and exacted from her. This traditional image of women as intermediate human beings, dependant, gullible and voiceless stuck especially in the background of patrilineage which marked most African societies. (131)

This fictionalised harassment of women only helps to reinforce what society adheres to in reality. New prisms in the portrayal of relations between the genders, in art as tools of advocacy in real life, are consequently long over due. Ngcobo says, "We are looking for a changed portrayal of women in our books; an accurate and a just portrayal" (151). Though a male writer, Okri has grasped this calling with alacrity and dogged persistence. From the short stories, through verse to the novel, he shows commitment to the renegotiation of gender in a genuine and purposeful way. This study would therefore contribute to information on gender in literature.

The cardinal source of data for the study is the library. Texts that comprise the trilogy are studied as the primary research area. Following the structural growth of the trilogy they are The Famished Road, Songs of Enchantment, the sequel to The Famished Road, and Infinite Riches, the last of the trilogy. Reference to critical publications underpins the study as secondary sources of data. However, such auxiliary anchorage should demonstrably be of relevance to the study in terms of content and contemporaneity. An analysis of the texts has to maintain precision in the correlation between thematic orientations and the informing theoretical basis. The texts are analysed as a symmetrical construct synthesised through prevalent commonalities. In this regard, the analysis focuses on an exposition of the portrayal of gender relations reflected in the concepts of womanhood and patriarchy, and proceeds to analyse trends in the trilogy that concretise into the quest for revision and restatement. The conclusion is subject to emerging critical observations and the possibility of formulating further research objectives.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WOMANHOOD TROPE

This chapter examines the womanhood discourse in such areas as motherhood, the institution of marriage, the portrayal of the woman in her private domain of life vis-à-vis her public image, relations with patriarchy, the contradictions in the collective experience of women and the self. The chapter focuses on Okri's approach to these issues that encompass womanhood both as a biological constituent and as a social construct. In this process the perception of gender as an aspect of sociality is interrogated.

Okri foregrounds notable aspects of womanhood in The Famished Road through the abiku myth. As a cyclical process of birth and death, the abiku is an entry point into the experience of motherhood, its attendant "joys" and tribulations. The recurrent birth and death of the spirit-child implies pain, fulfilment and loss for the mother. Azaro, the spirit-child, undergoes this cyclic existence severally. His friend Ade is also a spirit-child who has been through a repetitive process of birth and death. Ade says, "I have worn out my mother's womb and now she can't have any more children" (The Famished Road 477). But unlike Azaro, who has opted for permanent stay by severing attachment to the spirit world, Ade is visibly on the boundary of death and life, his leaning toward the former being so pessimistic. "Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be" (487).

Okri depicts the spirit-child as the search for fulfilment by the mother, which is painful, with only momentary periods of contentment. The abiku as an identity is the source of anguish for the mother since it embodies ephemeral relief from the burden

of childlessness before the pattern recurs. In The Famished Road, the herbalist who prescribes the ritual performance that is to end Azaro's vacillation between the world of the living and the dead inflicts pain when he pronounces him an abiku child. Azaro says, "He was the first to call me by that name which spreads horror amongst mothers" (8). This horror is due to the biological and psychic pain that repeated but unprolific childbearing subjects the mother to. "In not wanting to stay, we caused much pain to mothers. Their pain grew heavier with each return.... And we remained indifferent to the long joyless parturition of mothers" (4-5). It is more of lack of choice than as a result of malevolent mythology that the mother has to suffer. For the values of motherhood bestow a positive identity that women desire but it is at the same time contradicted by the painful moment of parturition. The narrator says, "Childless women prayed to be made pregnant" (Infinite Riches 373). The desire to free Mum from this predicament of motherhood motivates Azaro's pact to cease intermittent existence in the spirit world. He says:

It wasn't because of the sacrifices, the burning of oils and yams and palm nuts, or the blandishments, the short-lived promises of special treatment, or even the grief I had caused. It wasn't because of my horror of recognition either.... But I sometimes think it was a face that made me want to stay. I wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become my mother. (The Famished Road 5)

Experiencing the abiku phenomenon is thus tortuous reproductive motherhood as it marks the woman's relentless plight in the search for social mooring and harmony within the self. The "bruised face" represents the entire litany of traumatic experiences that mothers bear as they strive to project their positivised womanhood through reproductive motherhood. Considering the searing efforts of the mother of the spirit-child, therefore, Okri portrays motherhood as a necessity, as a prerequisite

for social visibility and elevation. A woman has to endure the sufferings of reproductive motherhood since it underpins her image in society.

Looked at differently, however, this could also amount to an interrogation of whether it is imperative for women to endure the cruelties of societal acceptance under patriarchal definitions of motherhood. With so much pain and suffering exposed, Okri seems to be tacitly re-evaluating adherence to the institution of reproductive motherhood if it is fraught with such debilitating challenges. Elshtain observes that, "Motherhood is complicated, rich, ambivalent, vexing, joyous activity which is biological, natural, social, symbolic and emotional. It carries profoundly resonant emotional and sexual imperatives" (243). The abiku myth is therefore symbolic, representing the countless times of physical pain and psychological agony that mothers have to withstand every time a child is born. "I passed a house where a woman was screaming. People were gathered outside her room. I thought thugs were beating her up and I went there and learnt that she was giving birth and that she had been in labour for three days and three nights" (The Famished Road 16).

Okri is concerned that though appealing to the womenfolk, motherhood as a contributory aspect of womanhood is oppressive, child bearing being contested as the exemplification of biological and psychological suffering.

This indictment of motherhood goes beyond the parturition experience. As argued by Rich that "historically, cross-culturally, a woman's status as child bearer has been the test of her womanhood; a test which gives rise to divisive categories of mother, matron, spinster, barren, old maid" (261), motherhood is disruptive in the context of realising the unity of women. For whereas society idealises motherhood as the

quintessence of womanhood, not fulfilling it becomes burdensome to women. Echoing Rich, Tong says, "Men, suggested Rich, have convinced women that unless a woman is a mother, she is not really a woman" (87).

Madame Koto is socially stigmatised because of her inability to assert herself as a mother through childbearing. Other women see her as the repudiation of what is not just definitive of their expression of womanhood but at the same time as the nemesis of society. According to Palmer, "Her independence and child-free status...divide her from other women whose lives centre on marriage and the family" (82). In the highly prioritised politics of motherhood, therefore, Madame Koto cannot postulate the norm. The women are adversarial towards her in their talk:

The women talked quite crisply about our association with her. They talked and kept eyeing me maliciously. They said of Madame Koto that she had buried three husbands and seven children and that she was a witch who ate her babies when they were still in her womb. They said she was the real reason why the children in the area didn't grow, why they were always ill, why the men never got promotions and why the women in the area suffered miscarriages. (The Famished Road 100)

It then emerges that Okri assigns Madame Koto the onus of explicating what society withholds from a woman who is unfulfilled as a mother. The fact that she has no child of her own to legitimatise her womanhood partially accounts for her personality as a malevolent force in society. Eventually, the collectivity of women as a sex category is threatened, with those excluded from the definition of womanhood at the point of motherhood seeking re-entry through a display of surrogate maternal responsibilities.

Okri brings Azaro into Madame Koto's life in a relationship of mother and child in order to suggest alternatives to reproductive motherhood that would finally restore the ostracised woman to the precincts of motherhood. Madame Koto says, "This is my son" (109). The policeman's wife also perceives in Azaro her deceased son in order to remedy her childless status. Azaro narrates that, "She always dressed me in their son's finest clothes. I only became scared of her when she started calling me by his name" (20). However Okri demonstrates that even though surrogate relationships that compensate for biological motherhood are possible, the woman is not fully embraced where her manifestation of maternal values is required. "Nevertheless," Tong argues, "patriarchal society teaches us that the woman who bears a child is best suited to rear him or her" (84). Hence Madame Koto can consider Azaro as her son but society, Azaro's mother included, still views her as an outsider because her relationship with the institution of motherhood has not been biologically mediated.

Another difference between Madame Koto and the rest of the womenfolk is in terms of the advantages that should accrue to women owing to their motherhood status. Seemingly, Madame Koto views children like Azaro as an expedient identity only if they enhance her entrenchment in economic power within the community. She tells Dad that, "I will let forget the money if you let your son come and sit in my bar now and again. Because he has good luck" (The Famished Road 63). On the other hand, women like Mum emphasise the maternal sense of fulfilment that is divorced from their reproductive capacity as the basis for empowerment and recognition within the community. To this category of women, motherhood is essentially for social accreditation.

Okri develops these juxtaposed interpretations to underline the embeddedness of social norms in the fabric of womanhood. His argument is that motherhood appropriates womanhood divergently. There are those women who rigidly approach womanhood through biological experiences whereas others, whom Madame Koto epitomises, place their premium on the possibility of independence. Madame Koto could be seen as a mother because of the role that she plays in the libertarian socialisation of the women. These are the women who attend her burial as her “daughters”. She is herself “One of the daughters of the earth” (Infinite Riches 373). Okri is thus investigating how womanhood, as described along maternal idioms, positions women in the socio-economic dynamics of society. Evidently, the writer seems to suggest that in a way society preordains the frameworks of womanhood since women are obliged to exploit only that identity that has social acceptance.

It is at this juncture that the relationship with a phallocratic culture is highlighted. According to Rich, “Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men” (216). Women who perceive childlessness as the cause of social stigmatisation are manifesting the criterion for societal approval that is tailored to the depiction of the woman’s sexuality and reproductive potential typical of patriarchy. Such women appreciate patriarchal values as the necessity and cardinal value of womanhood. Tong asserts that, “The joy of giving birth--invoked so frequently in this society--is a patriarchal myth” (75). Okri casts motherhood as an area in the relationship between the genders that promotes the oppression of women. Consequently, the picture of womanhood inscribed in the character of Madame Koto and her prosperous women celebrates a re-drawing of motherhood.

Mum brings out the woman subjugated under patriarchy whereas Madame Koto manifests the woman's possibilities in deconstructing the patriarchal myth. For even when the rigours of motherhood are so obvious, men still uphold the centrality of the institution in society. Dad says, "Birth brings glory" (The Famished Road 345). Here Okri examines the experience of motherhood as alienated from men. Men like Dad can only consider procreation as the primary function of womanhood. They see the bearing of children as a self-actualising accomplishment since it leads to an affirmation of their position in the hierarchical society as it validates them in the myth of patriarchy, whose pervasive connotation, in the realm of the power interplay between the genders, is dominance. "For a man," Tong states, "a child is away to immortalise his name, property, class, and ethnic identification; for a woman, a child is away to justify her homebound existence as absolutely necessary" (86). On her part, Kaplan observes and questions: "Since patriarchy wants women to want children, in other words, how can a woman distinguish her desire for the child from that imposed on her?" (4). It is children who mediate the value that men associate with motherhood. Little does a patriarchal definition of womanhood empathise with the ordeal that motherhood entails.

Again, these must be children who fit in the patriarchal scheme of culture. Where a woman brings forth children or other forms of procreation that the patriarchal culture considers as aberrant, the man is socially discredited for failure to exploit motherhood as a stepladder to social recognition. Knowing this, Madame Koto, in her project of subverting patriarchal definitions of motherhood, threatens her male nemeses with the possibility of their wives bearing deformed children, even animals. "My enemies will turn to stone, will go mad, go blind, lose their legs and hands, forget who they are. They will tremble from dawn to dusk, their wives will give birth to children who

torment them, and some will give birth to goats and rats and snakes” (Songs of Enchantment 191).

Part of the social punishment that a man could suffer therefore includes his wife deviating in her womanhood by raising morally depraved children, or even giving birth to animals. This is revelatory of the pressures that plague the woman as wife and mother because a patriarchal society expects her to protect the social image of her spouse through prescribed motherhood. Hence in the imagery of motherhood as a symbol of forces that engender the evolution of a national political culture, Madame Koto is given the portrait of one whose reproductive defectiveness accounts for the national asymmetry. “Then she dreamt that she was giving birth to a nation. An unruly nation, bursting with diversity. A bad dream of a nation, with potential for waste and failure as great as its enormous, its fabulous possibilities. She did nothing to alter the dream...could not transform her dream into something higher” (Infinite Riches 233).

The ambiguity here is quite obvious. For one, there is representation of motherhood as the incarnation of evil. Thus when national failure becomes evident, the sex accountable for giving birth is to blame. The nation is projected as having a mother, one who should bear the burden of its failures.

Put differently, the implication of motherhood, as a powerful institution is also demonstrated. Femininity is represented as a problematic, disruptive presence within the phallocratic social order. Okri seems to be echoing feminists who view motherhood as the source of women’s irreplaceable power since it is at this point that patriarchy is compelled to depend on them. Through her refusal to alter her dreams of

a turbulent nation, Madame Koto is used to demonstrate the critical role that women can assume in determining the evolution of a national entity.

Unfortunately, the woman as the nation's mother still has to suffer regardless of whether her goal is benevolent or malevolent. Madame Koto asks: "You all stare at me as if I am giving birth to a horse, but which one of you can give birth to a country and not die of exhaustion, eh?" (30). Here, Okri revisits the tribulations of national life in the imagery of childbirth and the concomitant pains. As such, motherhood is invested with the capacity to influence the emergence of a national entity but this power can only be realised under extreme duress because of the pain that is to be borne. Okri's concern is then that although men are rendered helpless when women invoke their reproductive potentialities to assert themselves, the suffering that accompanies the experience of parturition undermines this very power. It is therefore men who triumph in such a relationship as the tribulations of motherhood make the women vulnerable to a social reality that celebrates patriarchal dominance.

The oppressive reality of the woman that Okri depicts does not just manifest itself at the level of how her reproductive capacity is subjected to patriarchal goals. Beyond the ordeal of physical and psychic oppression that highlights the drawbacks and contradictory implications of motherhood, Okri further examines nurturing--social motherhood--and how it culminates into prescribing slavish duties for the woman. Here the woman is responsible for both the integration of the child into society and the creation of an ambience favourable and necessary for the affirmation of the man's needs. "They were anxious to return to their homes, to their husbands and children" (Infinite Riches 76).

Mum carries out duties typical of motherhood and at the same time getting on with wifeness-related roles. She has to consider the centrality of Azaro as a symbol of attaining social criteria for motherhood and at the same accommodate the presence of Dad as the signifier of the patriarchal essence within their domestic situation. “‘My husband is free,’ she said. ‘He doesn’t talk, and sits around like a fool, but at least he is safe. And my son is well. What more do I want?’” (86). Okri projects wifeness and motherhood as predetermined criteria for evaluating womanhood. He seems to contend that effective womanhood relies on diligence in the correlation of one’s status as wife and mother. Consequently, the mother-wife figure is elevated to the position of ideal womanhood. In other words, the absence of one substantially invalidates the recognition that the other elicits.

Mum responds to this duality in her domestic environment successfully but she also illustrates the predicament of such an inconvenient social location and the impact on the woman. She collapses and is seriously taken ill after braving the perilous search for Azaro and fighting to heal her husband. “I was the most beautiful girl in my village and I married this madman and I feel as if I have given birth to this same child five times. I must have done someone a great wrong to suffer like this” (The Famished Road 443). Womanhood is therefore sacrificial if wholly subordinated to the insensitive dogmas of a male-centred society. The woman who sacrifices herself in fulfilling the requirements of wifeness and motherhood pushes her identity beyond freedom and self-assertion. She becomes, like Mum, a mere object that society harnesses for the purpose of achieving male-specific priorities.

Okri is thus critiquing not just reproductive motherhood but equally the accompanying process of nurturing. He looks at how the well being of society

becomes the onus of the woman and yet, ironically, her own position is negated. Mum laments: ““This life! No rest. None. A woman suffers, a woman sweats, with no rest, no happiness. My husband in three fights. God knows what all this is doing to his brain. This life is too much for me. I am going to hang myself one of these days,’ Mum said” (477).

The most arduous experience for the woman who has to situate nurturance within motherhood and wifehood is therefore how she finally has to surrender her own entitlements. Her identity cannot be more visible than that of the husband and the child, which is what society views as a perfect enactment of womanhood.

Okri attempts to posit that any role within the sphere of womanhood that subsumes the potentially autonomous image of the woman is both alienating and revelatory of patriarchy. In the case of Mum the subject of identity and estrangement becomes evident at the moment of her frustrations when difficulties encumber either Azaro or Dad. The narrator says, “After two sleepless days on the road, set upon by dogs, hassled by miracles, beaten by policemen.... She collapsed on the floor, and was laid on a bench where she slept without moving for five hours” (*Infinite Riches* 50). The inadequacy of the separation between her own sense of selfhood and that of the two constrains her as though they were the same. Seemingly, to repudiate this oppressive perception of her relationship with the two would communicate a burdensome sense of failure. Tong observes that, “For a woman to admit any serious dissatisfaction with mothering is for her to admit failure as a person” (86). That women see their position in society in such a self-sacrificing perspective is hence the discernment that informs Okri’s engagement with the issue of the woman as wife and mother.

Having underlined the pitfalls of the woman's uncritical adherence to a fatalistic role, Okri appears motivated to delineate the manner in which a patriarchal dominance maintains her in this oppressive environment. The man is prominently cast as incapable of the emotional sensitivity and aptitude typifying femininity so as to withdraw himself from assignments that would require of him duties that the woman carries out as a nurturer. Part of Dad's violent outbursts when Azaro is in the wrong, though inadvertent because of his spirit-child phenomenon, are meant to contrast with Mum's affectionate and forgiving temperament. Indeed Azaro avoids Dad since the father appears lacking in the compassion and sentimentality of the mother. Mum's attachment to Dad wanes when she perceives him as endangering Azaro. She warns him that, "If you touch my son, you will have to kill me" (Songs of Enchantment 9). Unfortunately for her and much of the womenfolk, the more she perceives Azaro as her child and not as a shared responsibility, the more she succumbs to the rigours of nurturance.

Men cannot as such be categorised as innately excluded from the requisite conditions for effective nurturance. But rather they subtly espouse a hostile mindset whenever such a task is included in the strengths that would define their social respectability in order to evade it. The relationship that exists between Azaro and Ade, on one hand, and the blind old man, on the other hand, exemplifies this. The old man cannot derive any positive sensation from the presence of the boys since, according to the tradition that influences his social provenance, children are under the domain of motherhood, well distanced from his patriarchal position. As a result, whereas men would be seen antagonising and disregarding children, women stand out as the sex that society decrees to proffer solace. A plausible example is when Azaro arrives home after he had disappeared. All the women of the village show an outpouring of jubilation since

the process of nurturing does not just address the individual woman but is rather communal among the womenfolk. The narrator describes the moment:

I was on Mum's shoulder and I saw faces of women in the rain, faces lit up by lightning flash. They crowded us, arms outstretched, eyes warm. We were surrounded on all sides. The women touched me and looked at me as if I were a wonderful thing that had fallen from the sky. They fondled my hair, rubbed my skin, and felt my bones as if, in being lost and found, I belonged to all of them. I had brought with me a new hope. (The Famished Road 28)

Again when Mum is away searching for her husband the symbolic show of women's commonality and pervasive sense of the shared duty of nurturing is clearly demonstrated. The women minister to Azaro's needs and ensure he is comfortable. Dad is also at one point a beneficiary of the woman's overwhelming compulsion to nurture, protect and sustain. He falls seriously sick after a fight and it is Mum, Madame Koto and the woman otherwise implicated in witchcraft that fight for his life.

Okri seems to postulate the view that the skewed aspect of the way in which the sexes appropriate societal power has its genesis in the divisions that inform participation in the domestic and public domains of life. The existing kind of arrangement, he seems to argue, disadvantages the woman since it does not just burden her in the domestic environment but also relegates her to the margin of public life. As such men access and wield greater power in society since women are perpetually embroiled in the vicissitudes of domesticity and are not permitted to compete for public occupations.

The woman who aspires to penetrate the public sphere of life is faced with enormous impediments that principally emanate from her dependent position in society. It can

be seen that though pervasive in domestic life, the woman continues to rely on the man for her survival. Unarguably, the diminishment of the woman in public life delimits her opportunities for self-realisation.

The case of Dad working to support Mum and Azaro lends credence here. She is so anxious: "Was he well? Did he talk to you? What did he say? I pray nothing has happened to him. What will I do if something bad has happened? How will I live? Who will take care of you?" (151). His exacting work is not just about family welfare but further as a way of ensuring the dependent position of Mum. Once this has been affirmed and accepted as the appropriate relationship, the woman inevitably finds herself fettered. This is how Dad glorifies his role in the family and his reaction to Mum's possible independence:

A man breaks his back for you all and you can't prepare food for me when I come home! This is why people have been advising me to stop you trading in that market. You women start a little trade and then begin to follow bad circles of women and get strange ideas in your head and neglect your family and leave me here starving with only cigarettes for food! (171)

This explains why Mum is of the opinion that had Dad gone to school the family could be having better experiences. "If your father had gone to school we wouldn't be suffering so much" (93). She has resigned to not seeing such opportunities for herself because the woman is expected to maintain her dependence on the man. But once this unequal relationship is established and practised as the norm, the marginalisation of the woman is entrenched in the society.

The woman that Okri portrays significantly loses her individuality because of her inevitable dependence on the man and the social, psychological and emotional

implications of her womanhood-necessitated roles. One has to divest herself of inherent character and suffer alienation in order to fit in the roles of being seen as a mother, wife, and the condition of dependence. Tong suggests that, "In short, in order to be the partners rather than servants of their husbands, wives must earn an income outside of the home" (19). Mum is hence obscure in Dad's family. The presence of her personage is inconspicuous until she is rooted in her motherhood and wifehood positions. Okri contrasts her with the independent and assertive Madame Koto so as to successfully capture this subsumation of her individuality. Or even the exiled and alienated old woman of the forest. Since social roles and definitions that impede Mum's sense of self-awareness do not condition Madame Koto, the latter draws a more distinctive picture of selfhood. Indeed, many women of the slums are seen only when crises attendant to their position as mothers compel their being in the limelight. "The women, with a special vengeance, cracked firewood and planks on their heads. And a smallish woman, whose three children were still suffering the worst effects of the poisoning, was seen rushing from her house shouting: 'I'm going to pour boiling water on them!'" (The Famished Road 154).

Through the imagery of the white gazelles and their entrapment in the maze of the equally symbolic forest, Okri pursues further the point of womanhood and negated individuality. The women exist not just away from society but also under an identity that severs their relationship with the rest of humanity. The insecurity that Dad faces when Mum talks of going to Madame Koto's place is partly explicable in the perspective of regaining her individuality and thus either supplanting his own or becoming independent. Azaro recounts that, "Mum returned late and told us of the preparations for the great rally. She said women were earning a lot of money cooking for the event and that Madame Koto had offered her a job. She asked Dad if she

should accept. 'People will think you are a prostitute,' Dad said" (363). Obviously, the social anomaly that Madame Koto is perceived to be cannot be separated from her prominent economic stature. "She had been accepted in organisations that usually never allow women" (374). She joins these hitherto exclusive organisations because of her economic empowerment.

Okri's postulation is that a woman who unlike the fatalistic majority subverts patriarchal norms to such a radical point that much of the socio-political dynamics revolve around her risks stigmatisation. In other words, a non-conformist like Madame Koto manages to re-order the unjust sociality that obscures the existence of many women. Okri manipulates this device of contrast to explore the environment of interpersonal power by which individual men oppress individual women. The norms of exclusivity are indicted for being detrimental to the selfhood of women

In the same interest, Okri is generally critical of marriage and social definitions of the institution that consciously obfuscate the position of the woman and how her own individuality need not be reduced to part of the congenial environment that sustains the man. Observations relayed in the trilogy on marriage, as a social institution, are placed within the context of the man's attitude toward the woman, polygamy and molestation.

As shown through Dad in his impetuous proposition to Helen, the blind beggar girl, the foremost criterion that influences the attitude of men toward prospective spouses is the element of physical beauty. Azaro captures Dad's slobbering over Helen:

Glowing in a new delirium, dad began to praise her beauty and her elegance, her face of a yellow moon, her limbs of a blue gazelle, her eyes of a sad and

sacred antelope. '...You are a moon woman come to brighten the earth. Your skin looks like flowers from another planet. You are the mistress of beauty, princess of grace, Queen of the road. Let flowers of the earth see you and weep.' (Songs of Enchantment 15)

Okri uses this scene not to stress Dad's aesthetic sensibility but rather to satirise the superficiality of the man's attachment to the woman. This centrestages the "object" reality that the woman has to confront in her circumstances of marriage. By seeking to win Helen over through a display of his boxing earnings, and the idealism about the beggars' cause, Dad reveals the degree to which his appropriation of marriage is exploitative. Helen besots him and it is this aspect of beauty that he seeks to exploit. Helen is like this other girl whose fiancée betrays her: "And she was weeping about how she had been betrayed by her future husband with whom she had made a pact before birth in the spirit world. He had just gone and remarried the first woman that allowed him to make love to her" (Infinite Riches 166). The woman is therefore a victim, an object of exchange for the gratification of the man, but not an equal partner. Madame Koto is told, "Madame if you marry me you will sleep on a bed of money" (The Famished Road 223).

In a way this exploitation is not just in the privacy of marriage but also features in the public domain. For instance, though Madame Koto sees the value of Azaro as one with a business Midas touch, her male patrons insist on being waited on by women instead of the boy. "Then one of the men suggested to Madame Koto that she would be better off with girls as waiters and servants than with boys" (240). The overt intimation here is that with women attending to them, the men are assured of the possibility of sexual gratification, which is a subtle way of proclaiming their privileged social position and power over the women.

On this subject of marriage, sexuality and the exploitation of the womenfolk, Okri amply examines the women's own attitude also. Helen is depicted as not just cautious and reluctant to enter into such an exploitative relationship but is profoundly unconvinced about the justice that Dad seeks for her and other beggars. Her relationship with him resists the prospect of marriage or any other category of liaison that would contradict her prominence in symbolising justice for the poor and leadership for women. Paradoxically, Helen's physical blindness does not inhibit her morally upright and judicious opinion, unlike Dad who is apparently incapable of accepting the conception of his relationship with her, outside of marriage and beauty. He tells her that, "I want you to be my second wife. Stay and marry me" (Songs of Enchantment 16).

On the other hand, the women whom men exploit sexually and control in the public domain have succumbed to fatalism and permit men to justify their existence. The tragic dimension that this takes is such that male standards determine even the acceptability of a woman's sexuality. "The men say your anus smells" (The Famished Road 294). Consequently, revulsion and self-denial afflict the woman in this situation, as she struggles to achieve responsiveness to the patriarchal control of her sexuality. The vulnerability of women to sexual exploitation and the deformation of their identity is thus inevitable.

Women interpret the wife-husband relationship with a sense of resignation to the subjugation of the female in marriage. They find themselves socialising the men into responsibilities that maintain their own oppression. And they abhor the socialisation of men into supposed feminine roles. "There is the boy who would marry my daughter. Look at him, he is being trained in the ways of women" (76). Moreover,

few women who defy the institutionalised patriarchal authority in marriage are ostracised and wholly dismissed as exemplars of social aberration. Madame Koto has to contend with this isolation since she is not only located outside marriage but also appears as a negation of patriarchal power.

Okri highlights the issue of polygamy as being destructive and representing the extension of patriarchal oppression. Since the man is the one to initiate the woman's entry into a polygamous set up, as in the case of Helen and Dad, he is inevitably to face indictment when the liaison destabilises the status quo of his already existing marriage. Mum laments:

'So you want me to go, eh? So you are throwing me out because of that stinking beggar girl with a goat's eye, eh?'

Mum began weeping bitterly, cursing all the years of her privation and suffering, cursing the day she set eyes on dad in the village, during the most beautiful years of her life, swearing at dad for having drained the life out of her in such a profitless marriage. (Songs of Enchantment 16-17)

The disruptive nature of polygamy indicts the unequal power relations between the sexes in marriage. Because the man is vested with all the power and is projected as the unquestioned authority in marriage, the woman cannot successfully block or dissuade him from seeking social recognition through another relationship.

In the case of Dad, Okri uses the effectiveness of satire in portraying the undesirability of polygamy. The impetuous disposition of Dad in his proposition to Helen is in this context a vilification of the burdensome nature of polygamy. Pursued against the backdrop of his abandonment and dehumanising treatment of Mum, polygamy is detailed as oppressive to the woman since its basis is to advance the

man's patriarchal authority at the expense of the women. Okri is not opposed to polygamy but seeks to show its contradictory results. Dad's experience of self-effacement, after the relationship with Helen goes a cropper, discounts the relevance of polygamy.

The contradiction and irony that Okri uses here lies in the reversal of domestic roles as Dad struggles to recreate his image in the judgement of the wife. The power sought for in polygamy, the accompanying arrogance, insensitivity and aggressiveness only begets him diminished authority over Mum. Instead of this driving Mum into victimhood as a possibility in the polygamous set up, it inaugurates her progressive and steadfast conscientisation into a new departure in her personality.

The violence that Okri pictures in marriage distinctly creates the division of power and subordination in society. The woman is subjected to suffering as a victim of the man's tendency toward aggressive behaviour incorporated in the patriarchal scheme of values. "A man who had removed his arm from its socket was hitting the toothless woman on the head with it" (The Famished Road 137).

But women are in general excluded from images of violence unless they are agreement with their prescribed roles either as mothers or wives. They would fight to protect the children from external threats and dangers that the husband (father) poses and at the same time attempt to shield the husband from possible harm. Mum declares: "No one will hurt my only son" (Songs of Enchantment 104).

On the other hand, the form of violence manifested in the characters of men is not only sadistic but also disregards the position of the woman in marriage. According to

Palmer, "Male violence against women also plays a significant part in fictional representations of patriarchal power" (92). This is prevalent in their public lives and again often comes to the fore in the family. "Mum cried out and then stifled the cry. I heard Dad hitting her" (The Famished Road 151). Dad has often had to thrash Azaro mercilessly, provoking at times the intervention of Mum.

Importantly, whenever Dad assaults Mum it has to do with her performance either as wife or mother. He beats her up when Azaro is in the wrong and when he thinks she has failed in providing support for him as her husband. Okri seems to be consciously intimating that violence is both aberrant and a component of the patriarchal leverage in sustaining unequal relations between the sexes. It appears men deliberately recourse to violence in order to engender women's acquiescent attitude towards oppressive social institutions. For example, when Dad harangues his family as he contemplates to take on Helen, the blind beggar girl, for a second wife, it is evident that he needed to intimidate Mum so as to forestall her opposition to his polygamous posturing.

Generally, Okri shows the disapproval of the women when confronted with the sadistic viciousness of men in their public life. Typical femininity, like the case of Mum, cannot identify with a violent patriarchal culture. "The woman spoke of mercy, kindness, God's love, Allah's compassion" (218). Hence in all his supposedly heroic fights, Dad draws the adulation of Azaro and Ade but not Mum. The fascination with the black tiger image on the part of the two young boys validates their patriarchal socialisation. First, they are left to their whims and devices while in the public domain of communal life, which eventually implants a veritable sense of aggressive self-assertiveness in their personality. When they attack the blind old man with

stones, and the incident when Ade attacks Madame Koto with a knife, the illustration that Okri is keen on expounding is how public life is accommodating in the case of nurturing violent forms of patriarchy. "In a patriarchal society," Dworkin argues, "the norm of masculinity is phallic aggression" (46).

Perhaps the abiding illustration of women, femininity and the culture of violence is Madame Koto's disenchantment with Dad's fights. It is ironic that Madame Koto who has been developed through her assertive style of dealing with men recoils from and appears numbed by Dad's fights. She says, "Men are mad! I am not going to stand here and watch people kill themselves" (The Famished Road 399). Though assertive herself, Madame Koto is inherently effeminate. When Ade stabs her, instead of lashing out at the boy, like the way the blind old man deals with him on being stoned, Madame Koto plays a central role in attending to him. "He is mad! Seize him! He has bad blood! We must treat him! Hold him, but don't hurt him!" (Songs of Enchantment 193). Women are still maternal though real and potential patriarchal violence threatens them.

The heightened sense of sympathy that women demonstrate during Dad's tribulations at the hands of political thugs also indicates their aversion to violence. "One of the women burst out crying...women sang in our footsteps" (The Famished Road 284). This emphasises women's collective struggle against violence in its pervasive form as affecting all of them. As a result, the emergence of collective consciousness on the part of the womenfolk becomes inevitable.

But, first, Okri is not keen on stressing these commonalities among women. His concern is to demonstrate the existence of this common bond between women and

who at the same time show fatalistic passivity and an overwhelming sense of resignation when a women-specific agenda is to be affirmed. Thus when Mum painstakingly searches for Azaro and finally brings him home, the women are jubilant not because she has vindicated the woman's sensitive character, but as an adoration of the fierce sense of motherhood that she has affirmed. The interest of the women, therefore, is in the recovered child rather than the mother whose experience was quite gruesome as she spiritedly looked for her son. Though bonded together as members of a marginalised sex, they still interpret the value of their communal conscience as deriving validity from fulfilling roles that show adherence to patriarchal expectations.

Okri is critical in his interrogation of this displacement in the actions of women since he sees in it the germ of their marginalised position in society. A case in point is the sense of urgency that invades Madame Koto, Mum and the old woman when Dad falls ill and he has to be attended to. Contrasted with Madame Koto's own treatment of the women in her bar, it shows that the collective spirit of women is yet to identify with their own pressing needs in society. Hence the insignificant burial of one of their own:

It was not a big procession, and there were only a few mourners at that hour, all of them prostitutes, except for Madame Koto, who wore dark glasses and a black silk gown, and who was thinking about the money she could make from the fabulous political rally rather than about the prostitute whose body lay charred in the cheap wooden coffin and who had died from electrocution after the wind blew the tent away. (484)

It is not only their pertinent realities that they are yet to perceive and use their collectivity to resolve them accordingly, their existence, as people with an identity, is not exemplified. The women exist as one group, faceless and indistinct in their

sociality though their actions are within the roles assigned them under patriarchy. Okri often talks of “women”, conveying the impression that their identity is undifferentiated and largely invisible unless they are seen as one category of people. “They were petty traders, women without children, women with ailing children, women with angled faces and hollow cheeks and sober eyes, faces that never smiled” (Songs of Enchantment 56). Okri looks at this facelessness, this absence of individuality, even when sharing one common image, as the weakness in the body politic of feminism that renders the womenfolk susceptible to oppressive and exploitative tendencies on the part of the men.

Systematically, and without their own consciousness unraveling it, women have been emasculated and stripped of the potential that their communal existence endows them with. As such Okri does not only depict the powerlessness of the individual woman but also the invalidation of what would amount to the collective strength of the womenfolk. Womanhood can therefore represent the centripetal desire that announces the commonality in their suffering but beyond this it also illustrates shared powerlessness and subservience to patriarchy.

Being thus ineffective in their collective strength as a sex that is entitled to legitimate social protest, Okri clearly suggests the possibility of conscientising women around the personality of one of their own. Here Okri is aware that women have no chance of attaining the authenticity of their selfhood under patriarchy and neither is their unified existence a remedy. The alternative is therefore to promote a central force that allows women to nucleate around it. Thus Okri casts Mum in her activism and Madame Koto in her politico-economic project as signaling the formidable presence of women in a political environment whose dynamics centre on men. “I went about the market

confused by many voices that could have been Mum's, many faces that could have been hers, and I saw that her tiredness and sacrifice were not hers alone but were suffered by all women, all women of the market" (The Famished Road 162).

Nonetheless the promulgation that stands out in Okri's articulation of a centrality in the fraternity of the women is how this apex position impacts on the woman's interaction with other members of her sex. For, as it is very evident in the community of women that Madame Koto leads, the prospect of a phallic female figure is likely to subvert the project of organising women's interests around one central woman.

Under Madame Koto, the same form of oppression and exploitation that women encounter under patriarchy is persistent. Women experience prostitution, poor pay, and at times no pay at all, even when their own is in charge. "She shut her door and went to the backyard and asked the prostitutes to go for the night. They grumbled about not being paid" (432). It is at the behest of men that Madame Koto introduces women as prostitutes in her bar. She accepts this while remaining unaware of how it fractures her identity as a woman. She has allowed men to manipulate her into subverting her own image as the patriarchal antithesis. Thus she ceases to be the vanguard against the oppression that patriarchy occasions and becomes a conduit through which patriarchy achieves its goals. Kaplan argues that, "women's activist capacities and resilience in the face of oppressive institutional positioning exist alongside the centrality to their lives of the intra-psychic and conscious terrain, which often produces women's complicity with patriarchal norms" (10). Her initial reliance on Azaro to buttress her business interests would have been interpreted as a revolutionary act on the part of women who have now inverted the scheme of exploitation. But when she substitutes him for women, she acknowledges that an

arrangement whereby men play socially degrading roles is anathema to tradition and must be ameliorated in line with fidelity to patriarchy. A woman playing this role in the subjugation and degradation of women cannot be seen as a representative of authentic feminist sentiments of liberation. Her genuine identity is that of a female phallus figure who elaborates the inclusion of segments of the women folk in patriarchal oppression. Palmer observes that, "Many women...deliberately adopt an anti-feminist position and collaborate with men in order to survive" (152).

Yet as much as Madame Koto is vilified for her role in advancing patriarchy, it is necessary that this is also interpreted as a declaration of the powerlessness of women. Okri's concern in this case is partly to give women a chance for corrective self-evaluation and at the same time expose their economic vulnerability. Since men are the economically formidable sex, Okri shows that they are always bent on using their materially advantaged position to bring about the submissiveness and susceptibility of women to patriarchal values. When they demand that Madame Koto should bring in women to serve them, instead of Azaro, the woman has no choice but to conform to predilections of customers who account for the success of her business. According to Tong, "If we are to achieve sexual equality, or gender justice, then society must not only give women the same education as men; society must provide women with the same civil liberties and economic opportunities that men enjoy" (17).

Okri is consequently examining not just the failure of women to present a solution to the facelessness of their communal existence but how on a broader canvas their efforts are still trapped within the circumspection of phallocracy as being capable of disguising its social character. He exposes the phallocratic female figure as being spurious in her femininity and largely as an extension of patriarchy into the feminist

psyche. Essentially, then, we are investigating the falsity underlying the portrait of a matriarchal superwoman. She is, Okri seems to point out, not a woman at all but an anomalous hybrid created by a patriarchal culture with the aim of usurping the woman's place and power.

This is however just one possible perspective in which Madame Koto's ambivalent personality can be understood. The lineaments of patriarchy that we see in her would still be inconsequential if her role in the liberation and autonomous tendency is well evaluated. The portraiture of the multiple forms of Madame Koto is in consonant with the abiku imagery. Of course we have witnessed her powers of transmutation and the linkages that are constitutive of transformations in her personality. Madame Koto's ability to transmute her corporeal form is expressive of shifts in the power interplays between the sexes. When she abides in her mythic form, for example, she vindicates the embodiment of womanhood as a repository of immense powers. "She began to resemble a great old chief from ancient times, a reincarnation of splendour and power and clannish might" (The Famished Road 374). On the other hand, and like all women, she is cast as an exemplar of victimhood when in her corporeal form.

Unfortunately for Madame Koto, and even Mum, their capacity to invoke supernatural or mythic images of their normal identity is misconstrued as an aberration since while in this state social negativity is associated with their images. "She became, in the collective eyes of the people, a fabulous and monstrous creation" (374). Obviously this resentment emanates from the power that men lose when the women transcend the mundane reality of their enslavement. In a way this explains why Madame Koto's acceptance in the slums is not consistent. Though her immense powers and riches fascinate the slum dwellers, they still look at her as a deformation

of true womanhood. "She was a colossus in our dreams; her power over us became demonic" (Songs of Enchantment 36). But it is essentially her social leverage and how it threatens to defy patriarchy that renders her ill-fitting in the traditional patriarchal straightjacket.

The salient contestation of this chapter has been an exegesis of the female phenomenon and its social locale. Demonstrably, gendered dialectics of social constructs situate the experience of femininity in positions of victimhood and erasure. The trilogy has mobilised strands of pronouncements whose totality is the oppressive identity of existing within the code of femininity in the interchange between the genders. Ranging from maternity to possibilities of female bonding, the trilogy has vouched for an unbroken continuity in the constrictions that violate the authentic selfhood of women. In effect, motherhood and the entire broad spectrum of maternity have been approximated to a symbolic assertion of the unequal interaction between the genders.

Okri has posited both the reproductive exigencies of maternity and the nurturant paradigm as linkages in the relationship between the genders that undermine equality. Female experience, the writer intimates, is predetermined on the basis of an essentialist credo extraneous to what inheres in womanhood.

Social attitudes embedded in a patriarchal frame of reference underlie the overall mechanism of marginalising femininity. Hence in their relationships with men, women inescapably encounter the exclusion of their individuality as a validation of their passivity. Besides, Okri has examined the void in female bonding and how it conduces their vulnerability in the dialogic of gendered exchanges. The outcome is a

fractured feminist conscience whose ineluctable experience is continued patriarchal dominance.

Okri has critiqued the illusion of a homogenous feminist response to the lacunae in the dialectics of gender. The writer is sensitive to the likelihood of a female portrait that crystallises into the patriarchal principle therefore debunking the supposed traditional oppositions. The female experience contends against patriarchalism and introspectively laments its own fallibility. An all-embracing interest in the formation of the patriarchal essence is consequently imperative in identifying predispositions in gender relations in the trilogy. This is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

PATRIARCHAL RELATIONS

This chapter examines the manifold traits in the composition of patriarchy and how they contribute to gender relations in the trilogy. There is an integrated focal point that the chapter seeks to postulate. In other words, though there is appreciation for the dissimilarity in the way feminists appreciate relations with patriarchy, the chapter focuses on Okri's unifying presentation of these relations.

Most importantly, this chapter, unlike the preceding one, retracts from identities of women produced under an oppressive patriarchal culture. The emblematic thrust of this chapter is to interrogate the self-apprehension of men in their relationship with women. The involvement of women in the discourse of men, as they struggle with the station of their identity in human relations, is examined too.

In this manner, we anticipate a disclosure of the moral principle that underpins Okri's engagement with gender in human relations. The necessary presumption is that patriarchy as a critical phenomenon in social relations and the attendant feminist rejoinder are within the broad context of a particular sociality. Okri is therefore not just stressing the nature of human relations from the perspective of gender but also on the basis of subject / object formation in literary discourse.

The writer presents the transcendental domain of the spirit-child with appropriate cognisance of the specificity of relations that exist here. The abiku creation, both as a mythical occupant of the interspaces and as corporeal reality, is endowed with full sensibility in its social relations. Azaro's mythic properties are essentially an extension of objective reality into a conceptual schema of transcendent

consciousness. Here Okri alters the aesthetic and epistemological mooring of the methods of literary realism without distorting the basis of social interaction. Thus Azaro is still encultured within the family and the society regardless of his capacity for transmutation.

Indeed as a transcendent personage Azaro's success in socialisation is unlimited. It would appear that despite the relational expanse in the realm of the spirit-child, Azaro continues to adhere to signposts of social interaction in the mundane phenomenal world. In his relationship with the "king" of the abiku children, Azaro reproduces the mother-child relationship discernible in his disposition towards Mum. However he is a male-child and therefore his bonding with the king of the abiku realm illuminates the attitudinal posture of social expectations that inform maternal affinities.

To expedite this relationship, so as for Azaro to experience the presence of maternity or a mother figure, Okri allows the "king" of the spirit world to exist in a gendered duality. "Sometimes a man, sometimes a woman, he wrought incomparable achievements from every life. If there is anything common to all of his lives, the essence of his genius, it might well be the love of transformation, and the transformation of love into higher realities" (The Famished Road 3-4). Knowing the exigencies of the spirit world, Azaro seeks for what Cancian describes as the "feminine sphere of love" (12) in order to secure his destiny. This possibility resides in the female form of the king, which translates into an affirmation of the maternal. Azaro is aware of the vagaries of the abiku body and sees in the king a protector reminiscent of the nurturant maternal figure. "You will cause no end of trouble. You have to travel many roads before you find the river of your destiny. This life of yours will be full of riddles. You will be protected and you will never be alone" (The

Famished Road 6). He needs this kind of assurance as a vindication of his perception of the king of the spirit world as the equivalent of a maternal presence.

Azaro reveals the preoccupation of the male-child's psyche with maternity in his relationship with the king as the creative essence of the spirit domain. The psychologically entrenched desire to find emotional and social support in the loving and protective character of the king drives him. The presence of the king--a mythical entity--not just in Azaro's existence in the interspaces but even in the mundane universe intensifies this relationship. Thus the spirit-child would visualise the king's involvement in his perilous engagement with the dispensation of humans. The king is not always seen as a human personality when he interposes himself in such moments of the spirit-child's travails. "Our king was a wonderful personage who sometimes appeared in the form of a great cat" (3). These powers of transformation are convenient for Azaro who has sufficient intuition in decoding spirit-world forms and can therefore maintain his perception of the protective maternal even when the king is an animal image. He narrates:

Silently, from amongst the images, a cat came towards me. It sat at my feet, gazing at me with jeweled eyes. I stroked its fur. A voice said:

'Are you a fool?'

I spun around. Apart from the watchful statues, I saw no one.

I stroked the cat again. The voice said:

'Why hasn't the goddess given birth yet?'

'I don't know', I replied, without moving.

'Because she hasn't found a child to give birth to. If you are not careful you will be born a second time tonight.'

When it occurred to me that some times I could understand the language of animals, I woke from my enchantment, into the full awareness of my dangers.

(13 -14)

Being born a "second time" means death and rebirth for the spirit-child, which implies continued suffering for the physical mother. Therefore the king, appearing in the form of a cat, forewarns Azaro about the prospect of an experience that is oppressive to Azaro himself and his mother.

Okri is consequently demonstrating the distress of the male-child in the event of birth and the emotional relationships of its association with maternity. Azaro is averse to a second birth, as it is inherent with dangers his mother has to bear. He would rather escape to freedom than succumb to the predicament of childbirth which he knows impedes his acceptance into maternity owing to the suffering occasioned. The king of the spirit world intervenes to let Azaro know about his imminent death and rebirth because this confronts his mythical position with the choice of obliterated creative power. The king is propelled by the fear of losing Azaro's attachment to him at the point of maternity because although he can reincarnate human life, the critical relationship that defines Azaro's attitude is to sustain life so that the maternal is not subjected to relentless suffering. If Azaro is to die, even with the certainty of rebirth, the king will have failed in his role. Azaro would then sever his attachment to the mythical figure as a life-giving and life-preserving being.

The definitive aspect of the relationship between Azaro and the king of the spirit world is thus mediated through maternity. Azaro looks up to the king for creation and nurturance. Okri sees this relationship as being integral to the establishment and validation of reality beyond the phenomenal world. For in the absence of the

parturition process of the spirit-child, it becomes unconvincing to broach the presence of a consciousness that is devoid of an empirical setting. It is primarily via the birth and rebirth of the spirit-child that the nonrealistic narrative assumes verisimilitude.

Moreover, an assertion of the male-child and its social predilections is centred on Azaro and his interaction with Dad and Mum respectively. Here Okri restores the same theory of filial choices in the circumstances of the male-child and its maternal sensibility but again goes further to emphasise that it is virtually a deliberate case of motivation and preference. The representation is such that Azaro portrays his compulsive bonding with Mum and at the same time resigns to withdrawal in his attitude toward Dad. "I made a sound; Dad turned and saw me. And when he saw me he abruptly stopped laughing. After a long moment he started moving towards me and I ran across the street, towards Mum. 'Why do you keep running away from me, eh?' Dad asked with sadness" (34).

Due to the hierarchical construction of the patriarchal society, where men precede women and children, it is tenable to theorise that Dad is socially alienated from Azaro and can therefore not initiate the male-child's involuntary association with paternity. This hierarchy is subtly disseminated through such seemingly inconsequential rituals as the practice of eating kola-nuts. "The old man broke the kola-nut. He gave a lobe to Dad, who chewed off a bit and passed it on, prayer-laden, to Mum and then to me" (42). Hence women and children have shared social proximity that ultimately valourises their sense of oneness.

However it is not entirely a denotation of social hierarchies that directs the male-child's self-awareness away from paternity. In his relationship with the mother, the

male-child is drawn to the ideal sanctuary that she embodies. According to Kimmel, whereas men perceive in womanhood that “emotional, dependent and gentle--a born follower” (37) figure, the male-child is excited at the prospect of an ideal mother in the sense that she is “strong, self-reliant, protective, an efficient caretaker in relation to children and home” (37). This places the sympathetic attitude of the male-child towards the rigours of motherhood in a decipherable context.

The male-child, Okri seems to posit, is uninvolved in the oppression of the female personage because he remains unsocialised into the operations of patriarchy. At this point of his social development, the male-child is humane and far from the discriminating accent of masculinity. It is therefore not difficult for Azaro to make his choices when appropriating the image of a nurturant mother vis-à-vis the harsh and domineering masculine portrait of Dad. “There was another photograph in which I sat between them, small between two guardians” (The Famished Road 33).

Dad goes even further to assure Azaro of his protection should trouble beset him. “That evening Dad became the guardian giant who led me into the discoveries of our new world. ‘...this is where you too will live. Many things will happen to us here. If I ever have to go away, if I ever disappeared now or in the future, remember that my spirit will always be there to protect you’” (34).

This is of course in keeping with the tenets of patriarchal socialisation where the father figure is created to symbolise the essence above everything else. But this does not obliterate Azaro’s innate gravitation toward maternity. He is a male-child who in Freudian terms sees divergence in his values and those of the father figure and is consequently driven by a yearning for the mother. In times of peril, Azaro ignores

stereotypes of patriarchy as the symbol of security and appeals for the intervention of his mother. "That night, in the dark, with my eyes pressed tight, and with all the fury of my empty stomach, I summoned up the image of my mother. When I saw her very clearly, I spoke to her, begging her to come and save me. After I had spoken to her I fell asleep, certain that she had heard me" (24).

By conjuring up the image of his mother for survival, Azaro defies the patriarchal myth that preordains the invincibility of the masculine principle in defending society. In this manner, Okri vitiates his position that maternity is a positive social reality in relations that support the integration of the male-child into society. The writer is conscious that oppressive patriarchal relations are neither a biological inevitability nor a social dogma innate in the personality of men. The positive conjunction in the disposition of the male-child and maternity signal a relationship that is mutually beneficial. It is the male-child who identifies with and goes for accommodation in the values of maternity as an inevitable social strategy rather than drawing maternal attention as part of the image-making social responsibility of the mother.

Okri is thus exploring the relationship between femininity and non-patriarchal male consciousness in order to promote the rejection of a dominant patriarchal culture and evoke the basis for reconstructing womanhood in gender relations. The novelist has shown that in his formative stages the male-child is capable of a pro-feminist ideology until the skewed social environment gets him cloistered in patriarchal rituals and the negation of the Other. He illustrates that beyond the craving for accommodation in the maternal personage, the male-child would often be at variance with the father in attitudes that coalesce into the socially fabricated position of the woman in society. The contradistinction is basically in the sympathetic disposition of

the male-child as opposed to the father's patriarchal ideology. As such, whereas Azaro sees Mum's human vulnerability, Dad remains insensitive, maintaining a facade of indifference, which might not be a conscious act but yet still exemplifies the myth of manly stoicism. This is how the father and the son differ in their perception of Mum's case:

'I have been everywhere in the world, looking for a job to feed us, and you are asleep? Wicked woman that you are!'

Dad fumed and shouted for thirty minutes, without listening, without using eyes. Mum got out of bed, trembling violently, and went to the kitchen.

'Mum is not well,' I said.

'There is nothing wrong with her, she's just wicked, that's all.'

'She's not well,' I said again.

He didn't hear me. Mum came in with his tray of food. The plates clattered because of her trembling, which she tried to control. (52)

In effect, Okri observes the relationship between the male-child and the maternal figure as constituting reciprocity. The mother would go to any length (the self-sacrificing paradigm) to achieve the well being of the child. At the same time the male-child sees himself as sharing a special relationship with his maternal environment that comes with such obligatory responsibilities as shielding the mother from the adversities of a father steeped in masculinity. This relationship is not foisted upon either the mother or the male offspring. Okri tries, successfully, to demonstrate the involuntary interest that runs beneath the disposition of the male-child towards his mother figure. Azaro recounts his indecision and tragic choice:

And between both I didn't know who to choose. Mum went off, wailing, in the direction of Madame Koto's fabulous bar. Dad marched on to Sami's place, unmindful of the destruction he was sowing behind him. I started after mum,

but she screamed at me, as if she perceived that I was in alliance with dad. ...And so, watching mum grow smaller in the distance, a slouching figure, wailing and renting her wig, I reluctantly stuck with dad's story, and suffered the choice I made for many nights to come. (Songs of Enchantment 17)

Paternity is thus synonymous with pain and anguish, or much else that the male-child finds repellent. Here the male-child is stampeded into a relationship not based on the moral of humaneness but rather the unfulfilling experience of seeing humanity through patriarchy. The disenchantment with paternity puts the male-child in a position of emotionally inflexible devotion to the image of the mother. He becomes so conjoined with the maternal figure and the accompanying social values that any threat to the mother is a vividly expressed traumatising experience. Azaro explains why he had chosen to live and his grief at Mum's illness:

I remembered that it was because of her bruised face that I had chosen to live, to stay, in the confines of this world, and to break my pacts with my spirit companions. One of the many promises I made before birth was that I would make her happy. I had chosen to stay, now she wanted to die. I burst out crying. I threw myself on the floor and thrashed and wept. The demon of grief seized me completely. Mum tried to hold me and console me, and find out why I had so suddenly begun crying. She didn't know how inconsolable I was at that moment, because she didn't know the cause of my grief. She didn't know that the only thing that could make me stop was a promise from her that she would never die. (The Famished Road 228-29)

Okri is projecting maternity as the primacy of the male-child's existence. The mother is so central to the consciousness of the male-child that he cannot envisage existence without her.

It is a relationship juxtaposed with the usual oppositions between the genders in order to intimate the possibility of reconstructing the paradigms of gender dialectics in consonant with primordial affinities. In other words, it is at the juncture of the inchoate mindset of the male-child that the novelist attempts to highlight the possibility of revision in the relationship between femininity and patriarchy. Okri invokes the consanguinity between the mother and the child to re-evaluate the premise that the oppressive posture of patriarchy is an unalterable social condition, the very essence of stability and moral perfection. The writer searches for further evidence in the world of the mythopoeic. Here, again, it is Azaro's presence that restores Mum back to life since his being is embodied in her own existence. Mum wonders:

‘I saw my son in the land of death. Azaro?’

‘Yes?’

‘What were you doing there?’

‘I’m here, Mum’, I said. (57)

Drawing on his mythical powers as an abiku child, Azaro had followed his mother’s consciousness beyond the mundane territory of physical bodies. This is his decisive battle to sustain the maternal as the central image that structures his own sociality. Interestingly, Dad is frequently in the throes of death but this hardly causes Azaro grief. During Dad’s moment of physical death, Azaro stands apart from the tragic drama, only relating to the situation as an omniscient narrative voice. His participation in Dad’s plight retains the detachment of a sympathetic but not empathetic involvement. Essentially, it is because Dad’s predicaments lack the immediacy that Azaro finds in Mum’s sufferings since his affinity for the maternal as a male-child makes him a vicarious victim of Mum’s suffering. Through Mum Azaro

visualises the emotional self and the archetype of his relationship with the world of humans.

Understandably, then, Azaro would not be expected to accord Madame Koto the same attachment that permeates his relationship with Mum. Madame Koto is interested in a mother-son relationship between herself and Azaro but the latter remains dissuaded from her because she is a visible incarnation of patriarchal attributes. The relations that Madame Koto seeks to foster, the cause of Azaro's withdrawal from her generous maternity, derive from the same masculine conditioning that Dad connotes and which become a diabolical order of aspirations in the character of the blind old man. The spirit-child recoils away from masculine expressions of human relations because birth, which is symbolised and mediated through maternity, is the ultimate index of his identity. Not knowing this, Madame Koto alienates herself from such spirit-children as Azaro and Ade by projecting her identity as a masculine power, desirous of the values of a patriarchal social order.

Her conflictual relationship with both Ade and Azaro is entirely because she is bereft of maternal qualities even when she displays surrogate motherhood. Indeed she is a destructive, malevolent presence that subverts the self-sacrificing maternal image by seeking to offer young boys as sacrifices for her own social elevation. She cannot give birth unless Azaro's death mediates it. The death of Ade is in the same scheme of the cultic stature of her social image. She tells Dad that, "I want your son to come and sit in my bar again till I give birth...I am dying and may be your son is the only person who can help me" (Songs of Enchantment 58).

The relationship between Azaro and Madame Koto is relentlessly problematic despite her identifying with him as her son. Their antagonism persists in negating any possible bond of maternity between them even in the interspaces where they encounter each other as mythical creations capable of transformation. Madame Koto threatens:

‘What were you doing in my dreams?’

‘Nothing.’

‘...if I catch you in my dreams again I will eat you up.’ (The Famished Road 350)

Moreover, there is obvious estrangement from femininity in the didactic position that Madame Koto takes towards Azaro. Like the father who is keen on entrenching Azaro in the patriarchal tradition, Madame Koto suppresses the possibility of the feminine in Azaro by inculcating into him the traits of manhood. “When I got back she had set down a glass of her best palm-wine for me. I sat in a corner, near the earthenware pot, and drank peacefully. ‘That is how to be a man’ she said” (86). Knowing that maternal affinities are predominant in the psyche of the male-child, Madame Koto seeks to subject Mum to vicarious suffering so as to punish Azaro. This is how she reacts to Azaro’s warning about her imminent death:

‘You are soon going to die,’ I said.

Uttering a twisted cry, her face contorting into a mask so ugly that she brought the night closer to my eyes, she let go of my hand and staggered backwards. Swiftly, drawing her spells about her, and banishing the waves of approaching madness with a fantastic movement of her arms, she regained herself and gave me the most eerie smile.

‘Your mother will pay for what you said,’ was her response. (Infinite Riches 206-07)

On the whole, Okri explores the relationship between the male-child and women from the perspective of attachment to maternity and its counterpoint. Where the maternal is expressed, the male-child, like Azaro, sees room for self-fulfilment and readily espouses such a relationship. Okri brings out masculinity as an encumbrance in the relationship between the male-child and paternity. This continues to be the case even when the point of articulating such traits is rooted in a female body. The novelist is thus suggesting an awareness of reconstructing positive relations from the perspective of a young mind that is yet to encode the biases of patriarchy. Okri's thesis is that such formative male consciousness contradicts patriarchy and stands for the positive in the relations between men and women.

Necessarily, therefore, the writer, in the process of examining patriarchal relations, must contrast this kind of non-patriarchal consciousness with the dominance of the masculine principle in men like Dad and the blind old man, whose level of socialisation predicates the continuity of a patriarchal culture. The fundamental position of Okri in examining human relations engendered through pervasive patriarchy is how the adult men perceive their location. The probable rationale is that men in their adult lives have not only subscribed to the essentialist creed but also are conscious of relating or carrying out their views in line with the dominant culture. Obviously, the attachment to maternity as exemplified by the male-child is replaced with a set of roles and principles deeply embedded in social hierarchies.

Patriarchal relations are hierarchical and this prefigures men's social attitudes. There is always the masculine principle as the basis that legitimates their domination of the other. Marilyn French says, "The masculine principle as the pole of power...the pole of the individual who dedicates his life to a super personal goal, while the feminine principle is the pole of sex and pleasure.... The pole of people destined for oblivion,

who dictate their lives to personal satisfaction" (227). In effect, it is the "erection of structures, the strength to exercise power, possession and action" (229) that put the masculine principle in its customary social locale.

In the process of carrying out demands of the masculine principle in human relations, especially discourses inflected by gender, the expected rewards are wealth and status. Okri interrogates the operations of this principle in the attitudes of men in their social relations and how it crystallises their consciousness into a rigid tradition of patriarchal socialisation.

The trilogy presents men as trapped in the consciousness of patriarchy in their domestic and public lives. In the home they are encountered as dispensers of authority and outside home as the main political actors. Filmer corroborates this by saying:

If we compare the natural duties of a Father with those of a King, we find them to be all one, without any difference at all but only in the latitude or extent of them. As the Father over one family, so the King, as Father over many families, extends his care to preserve, feed, clothe, instruct and defend the whole commonwealth. (63)

This, however, is far from arguing that Okri adopts a homogenous strategy in depicting social relations involving adult men and femininity. In fact only Dad is fully developed in the trilogy as husband, father and a prominent voice in the political drama of his country. Other men are particularly seen as the source of the masculine principle in the public domain. Indeed Dad's completeness in embodying the psyche at home and outside the home aids Okri in realising a linear structure in the development of the male character in the trilogy. Paglia has observed that:

The western idea of history as a propulsive movement into the future, a progressive or Providential design climaxing in the revelation of a Second

Coming is a male formulation. No woman, I submit, could have coined such an idea, since it is a strategy of evasion of woman's own cyclic nature, in which man dreads being caught. Evolutionary or apocalyptic history is a male wish list with a happy ending, a phallic peak. (14)

It can however be seen that Okri, in as much as he uses Dad to symbolise the structure of patriarchal engagement with historical forces, isolates him from the extremism of a devastatingly assertive masculine principle. The pattern of Dad's development in the trilogy is not just from the domestic into the public but also from the uncritical adherence to a patriarchal order to a humane consciousness in his relationship with the womenfolk. In a way, Okri is sensitive to differentiation in the way the masculine principle is presented in social relations. Apart from it not being homogenous as a unifying neurosis among all men, it is neither constant nor is it unchallenged in the consciousness of one man.

Dad's vision of himself in the family as the essential reality, relegating others to peripheral and only supportive roles, is an indictment of his patriarchal identity. For it is in sync with the idea of possession, typical of the masculine principle, that men seek to relate to their spouses. Thus Dad is least appreciative of Mum's and Azaro's individuality in their domestic relationships. He is not just the father-figure that supposedly transcends their lives; he interprets his own social position as the ultimate moral commitment that the others must shore up. In his relationship with the family, he considers their subordination as inevitable since he is the moral absolute. Azaro recounts:

His face swelling, his chest heaving, his big muscles bristling, he accused us of betraying him, of not caring enough for his ideals.

He rounded on me because I had stopped spying at Madame Koto's bar. He rounded on mum because she had not been keeping in touch with political developments, and had done nothing to recruit women to his political party. And he turned on both of us for failing to keep alive his dream of a university for beggars and the poor. (Songs of Enchantment 11)

Other than obscuring the individuality of his family members, Dad's scheme of moral greatness becomes an alienating factor in his relations with them. In particular, the obsession with the patriarchal idea of moral greatness generates the discordance in his relationship with Mum as husband and wife. This is an arrangement that pushes Mum into the constraining position of powerlessness, and renders illegitimate all her personal aspirations.

When Dad insensitively dismisses Mum as weak and unnecessarily vulnerable, he is simply stating her deviation from a culture that prioritises power, possession and domineering action. But Mum is innately a female construct, who although has the capacity to profess such views, is aware of their inauthenticity in the context of ideal womanhood. Ironically, the so-called ideal womanhood is a derivation of patriarchy itself. Okri therefore interrogates contradictions within the patriarchal tradition where the woman is put on a pedestal and at the same time the overriding masculine principle dominates her. Thus polarities emerge which can only be resolved if the men accept socialisation into new roles and identities in their relationship with women. But achieving this is not easy since the pervasive nature of the phallic element in social relations penetrates the public sphere too. And it is while in the dynamics of the public domain that the young male adult, previously committed to the maternal, is integrated into a culture of domination that is supportive of the masculine principle. Dad tells Azaro:

‘We showed them pepper, didn’t we?’

‘Yes.’

‘That is how to be a man?’

‘How?’

‘When people fight you, toughen up, study them, wait for the right time, and then fight them back. Fight them like a madman, like a wizard. Then they will respect you.’ (The Famished Road 304)

Okri is depicting how the myth of manhood is exhibited through the culture of violence. To be violent is synonymous with attaining the plane of reality that announces one's separation from the feminine principle. Unfortunately, though, this mode of self-realisation as projected through the patriarchal insistence on power and domination threatens to seep into the set-up of family relations and hence opposition from the maternally sensitive male-child. Kaplan observes that, “The boy’s longing for, and identification with, the mother suffers a severe blow with the entry of the Father, the need for individuation” (30). Azaro intervenes:

Mum started towards the kitchen and Dad pounced on her and grabbed her neck and pressed her face against the mattress. Mum didn't resist or fight back and Dad pushed her head sideways, towering over her so I couldn't see her face, and then went back to his chair.

‘Leave mum alone,’ I said. (The Famished Road 172)

In terms of plot structure and character enhancement, though, Dad evolves from this form of primitive, aggressive masculine power, into a broader and higher public realm of subordinating the masculine principle to a just cause. Instead of invariably fulfilling the masculine principle, violence becomes a moment of transition into a state of vision and evaluation of human affairs. This is indeed where differentiation between Dad and other men, like the blind old man, is achieved. Okri elevates Dad’s

public fights into acts of self-sacrifice, propitiatory gestures of seeking to gain entry into the higher essence of re-ordering human relations. As such his tragic public fights are metaphorical points of his initiation, like the abiku child, into gradations of existence, each representing progress in conceptualising the social order of things. The writer explains: "That's why you have three deaths of the father and the three births of the father. There are many, many ways in which the abiku set of variations takes place .It can take place on smaller, more visible levels and it can take place on larger levels, but it is all there" (Wilkinson 84).

Therefore, although his fights are still in the context of the presumably all-encompassing moral loftiness of the masculine principle, the underlying purpose, which is divorced from the mean expression of masculinity, is the goal of transformation. For instance, after fighting the mythical man in a white suit Dad lapses into a state of unconsciousness that is paradoxical since it becomes a revelation of oppressive human affairs and the need to re-order them. This is his vision:

He saw the world in which black people always suffered and he didn't like it. He saw a world in which human beings suffered so needlessly from Antipodes to Equator, and he didn't like it either. He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world, our history and achievements rigged out of existence. He saw the rich of our country, he saw the array of our politicians, how corruptible they were, how blind to our future, how greedy they became, how deaf to the cries of the people, how stony their hearts were, how short-sighted their dreams of power. ... But Dad's spirit was restless for justice and more life and genuine revolution. (The Famished Road 492-94)

Dad's fights are thus not always the domineering male principle in operation, or patriarchal action aimed at gaining social advantages but rather a moment of insight into the affairs of humans and the search for recreation. In this manner, Okri elevates Dad into a martyr figure. Even the heavy work that he does, carrying loads, recalls this same motif of propitiatory acts enshrined in the larger canvas of martyrdom. Of course he is being the competitive and work oriented archetypal man, a way of negotiating for superior social location in relations with femininity, but he is again keen on mediating a heightened sense of being through the relegation of the physical body. Dad is simply wrestling with a mundane reality that refuses to inhere in his scheme of things in some of the projections when the masculine principle dominates his actions in the public sphere. His creditors, the thugs at Madame Koto's bar and participation in the frequent orgies of violence accompanying the penultimate moment of negotiating for political power by both the Party of the Rich and the Party of the Poor, are realist narratives caught in the path of his conscience as he seeks for a reconstitution of society.

It is under similar circumstances that he encounters Madame Koto as a personage to whom he has to relate as a result of their social proximity and Madame Koto's prominent role in midwifing the emergent dispensation of the political struggle. Predictably, Dad's initial temptation is to thrust upon Madame Koto the absolutist element of the masculine principle. But unlike in the case of Mum who in her feminine role permits patriarchy to determine her social relationships with men, Madame Koto is a symbol of resistance. She does not however avert dominance from the perspective of a female personage. Madame Koto, like most of the men whose vanguard is the masculine principle, conducts her affairs from similar attitudinal

leverage. She has physical power, wealth and legendary social status, which suffice in predicating her as the dominant voice in her relationships with both men and women.

Dad is therefore effectively countered by a principle that is similar to his only that it emanates from the perspective of a female body. Persistently and consistently, the relationship between the two remains erratic, with interludes of co-existence but basically aware of the clash by the masculine principle that both own. Madame Koto is a manipulator and a vengeful woman who exposes Dad's powerlessness in defending his family in order to repulse his expected authority over her. When Mum falls out with Dad and gets estranged, Madame Koto sees this as an opportunity to ascertain her masculine-like authority over both men and women. She tells Dad, which is perilous, that if he is to have his wife back then he must let Azaro resume his visits to her bar. She says:

'I will let your wife go on one condition.'

'What?'

'I want your son to come and sit in my bar again till I give birth.' (Songs of Enchantment 58)

Dad's ownership of patriarchal privileges is what Madame Koto is disrupting and in the process asserting her own phallic sense. His being denied authority over his wife equates him to the powerlessness of the castrated Freudian figure. Madame Koto is so subtle and effective in imitating and eventually displacing patriarchy that every mode of imagination that communicates her sociality is in some way a display of power. When Dad and Azaro reach her place, it is both her cultic myth and authority that they encounter even before being in her physical presence. Dad is therefore caught in this interplay of power not as a representation of the patriarchal canon but as a

subject, helpless in the presence of the phallic matriarch. Azaro narrates their encounter with Madame Koto:

Madame Koto, like an ageless matriarch, was sitting on an ornate chair, with the seven red candles surrounding her. She had a yellow mantilla on her shoulders. She had grown so enormous that the large chair barely contained her bulk. She wore a deep blue lace blouse and volumes of lace wrappers. She had acquired gargantuan space. As the evening darkened, her presence increased. Power stank from her liquid and almost regal movements. Behind her, in a large golden cage, was a shimmering peacock. (56)

Thus immersed in an aura of enormity, power and prestige, Madame Koto is inevitably in an antithetical temperament in relation to the social position of Dad as a man and therefore the quintessence of an essentialist tradition. Okri is not just examining a social conflict but also the displacement of a culturally sanctioned element in the reality manufactured by and under patriarchy. In fact, all along Dad's position in relation to that of Madame Koto has been diminishing in stature and influence. They both have admirable physical power but Madame Koto's rugged mobilisation of a mythical social and economic identity seems to overshadow Dad's accomplishments. She moves outwards in her human relations, towards the visibility of the realist phenomenon whereas Dad drifts into the introspective and socially invisible stream of consciousness.

Eventually, though, Dad has an idealism that broaches moral perfection. But Madame Koto is an achiever who is seen as enjoying the benefits of the masculine principle--wealth, power and status. It is a tragic subversion of reality for Dad because he is emasculated and rendered dependent on Madame Koto. He tells Azaro that:

‘When I come back I will go and see Madame Koto.’

'She is Mad,' I told him.

He stared at me in that curious fashion again.

'May be she can loan us some money,' he said, ignoring my piece of information. (The Famished Road 237)

But the residual patriarchalism in Dad cannot allow him to succumb to assistance from Madame Koto. "I became aware that Dad couldn't quite bring himself to ask Madame Koto for money" (253). This reluctance has nothing to do with decisive assertiveness in Dad. His major inhibition is the fear of betraying his social status as a man, tacitly acceding to the reversal of roles in the gender dialectics. Finally, Dad decides to completely distance himself from Madame Koto by accepting the impossibility of co-existence. "'And,' Dad said, sternly, 'from now on Madame Koto is our enemy'" (306).

The resistance of the feminine principle to being constrained into a patriarchal straitjacket underpins this disintegration in their relationship. Madame Koto has certainly not just supplanted Dad's social position but also invalidated elements of culture and tradition deposited in his male personage. As a result, she is the equivalent of patriarchal power and aspires to dominate it even.

At this point, though, Okri intervenes to retain Dad's power and project his image through another state of consciousness that is unlike Madame Koto's materialistic essence. Okri places Dad into a higher vision of human affairs that questions and devalues the chaos in Madame Koto's world. And when Madame Koto ascends to the same reality, she is neither as noble as the old woman of the forest nor Mum, nor does she leave behind her chaos. "While Dad ranged the spheres crying for justice,

Madame Koto sucked in the powers of our area. Her dreams gave the children nightmares” (495).

The only redemption for Dad’s image in his relationship with Madame Koto is his higher and just vision when they encounter one another in the interspaces. Here Madame Koto is so overpowered that even when malevolence and vengeance occasion Dad’s blindness, this loss of sight paradoxically becomes an entry into a just and humane social order. The blindness that Dad suffers as a result of having challenged Madame Koto’s myth in public is therefore both symbolic and positive for it exposes human possibilities that vilify the wickedness of people like Madame Koto and the blind old man. It is ironic that one rendered physically blind can perceive the idyllic in such terms:

He named the gods of the ghetto: the god of poverty, distant relation to the god of rainbows, the god of fear and of transferences, the god of timidity and suspicion, the god of self-imposed limitations and fatalism, the god of quacks and diseases, the god of pullulating superstitions and negativity, the god of blindness and fear of what other people think, the god of illiteracy and refusal to think. Then he named their counter-gods: the god of Consolation and Solidarity, the god of Music and Beauty, the god of Good Visions and Quiet Consistence, the god of Mystery and Wisdom, the god of Work and Health, the god of Art and Courage, the god of Democratic Kindness and Humility, the god of Clarity and Strong Thinking, the god of Time and Creativity, the god of Light and Universal Love. (Songs of Enchantment 279)

The struggle between Madame Koto and Dad is therefore not just at the mundane plane where the former wins by subverting the operations of the masculine principle.

Their understanding of each other as nemeses percolates into the metaphysical where

Dad personifies noble ideals that are out of Madame Koto's reach. It is however possible to look at Dad in this state as more of a neutral and unified person than as one who promulgates sentiments aligned to gender particularities. Okri's enactment of the higher cosmic reality has the emphasis of looking at the phenomenal mould from a station that is unsullied by the divisions in the ordinary reality. Be as it may, it is Dad and not Madame Koto whom the novelist anoints to convey the greater possibilities that humans should strive for in their relations. Thus even the representation of the ideal cannot escape traces of patriarchy and its world outlook. The ethos being initiated is for sublime human relations but it has its provenance in the masculine structure of Dad.

Other than in her relationship with Dad, Madame Koto's appropriation of relationships with other men is still typically oppositional. In constructing Madame Koto's identity, Okri is aware of what identifies the phallic and how its negation can be deposited in femininity. The overall design of the novelist is such that a new power dispensation emerges but not before the undoing of the old patriarchal order has been ascertained. As a result the femme fatale motif permeates through Madame Koto's actions since it is the only way of destroying the edifice of patriarchy.

In the physical world, Madame Koto can only relate to men either as an equally prominent force or the ultimate power because she is opposed to her own subordination or subsumation. Okri signifies this relationship in a variety of ways whereby the feminine principle is a power unto itself, so much such that patriarchy is marginalised or totally defeated. Madame Koto's fights with men, for instance, denote her obsession with the physical demolition of the phallus because it is socially impregnated with the power that threatens femininity. A description of one such fight:

The woman stopped listening. When we went past the crowd we saw that she was dragging him about, yanking him around by the pants. He kept trying to free himself from her masterful grip on his trousers, a grip which encompassed his private parts. He tried to prise her fingers apart and when that failed he took to hitting her hands, screaming insults at everyone. Then, suddenly, to our astonishment, the woman lifted him up by the pants and threw him to the ground. The crowd yelled. The man flailed, got up, shouted and huffed. Then he pounced on her, lashing at her face. Dad started toward him, but his rescue attempt was cut short. The madame grabbed the bad loser's crotch and he screamed so loud that the crowd fell silent.... That evening was the beginning of her fame. (The Famished Road 36-37)

The meaning captured in this fight is decipherable only as a symbolic representation of an encounter between social polarities--femininity against masculinity. More precisely, it is the reaction of the female against the phallus as an encapsulation of power. This signification of gendered bi-polarity is not coincidental but rather the novelist deliberately installs it in the character of Madame Koto in order to expose the schism between phallocracy and the onslaught of femininity against it.

To a large extent, all men within Madame Koto's sphere of social identity have a power relationship with her, derivative of the inbuilt disjunction between the phallus and femininity. She has to achieve the subordination of the men either socially or in terms of the body symbols that bring out her relationship with them. She annuls their special claims or phallogratically justified social identities through the assignment of roles that contradict patriarchy, as she herself gets takes up the central position. In her matriarchal position, the men who surround her are either eunuchs or those confined to responsibilities that highlight her elevated status. On the hand, the women around

her appear to be acknowledging the power and hope that one of their own wields, unlike the men who illustrate emasculation. Azaro describes the powerful aura:

In the new room we saw an orderly queue of women, all surrounded with the grave aura of people who had travelled vast distances to have their problems heard, people who had been waiting with great patience all their lives and who were waiting patiently now. They had brought food with them. They eyed us with profound indifference. We went past them into a smaller room potent with ritual smells, the smells of power, of the earth liberated by rain, of a mighty woman, of gold and perfume, of childlessness, sweat, eunuchs, virgins and pitchers. A great white veil divided the room. Beyond the veil seven candles were aflame. Two men were fanning a leviathan figure on a regal chair. (Songs of Enchantment 56)

Madame Koto is the central image in this scene and the men can only relate to her as the inessential element encompassed in her invincible sphere of power. It is an achievement that alters and recasts the feminine principle by extracting it from subordination and subservience to be realised as the apotheosis in the power interplay between the genders. Owing to this inversion of the patriarchal hierarchy, women start looking up to Madame Koto for a redefinition of their selfhood. Appreciating her triumph over the patriarchal order, they come to her for empowerment and social resuscitation and, consequently, re-insertion into the labyrinth of human relations. Madame Koto is hence a woman who highlights the destiny of the rest of the womenfolk in their socio-political aspirations.

Madame Koto tropes a plane of reality hitherto alien to femininity but now being demonstrated as achievable through her refusal to accommodate subjugation in her social and political relations with patriarchy. Her personage is the wider symbol of

deconstructing the myth of phallocratic power through a ruthless and vicious restatement of feminine potency. She is an invasion of patriarchy and how it seeks to legitimatise the discourse of interaction between men and women. She illustrates that the possibility of reconceptualising society lies in a radical annihilation of myths perceived as sacrosanct under phallocracy yet they suppress the woman's potential for self-expression and affirmation.

Her social and moral standards in relating with patriarchy are organised around the principle of reversed roles. She is hesitant to enter into existing institutions and norms because they guarantee and preserve patriarchal authority and rituals. Okri uses her to explore the possibility of new frontiers and social indices in the relationship between men and women. Around her, therefore, the novelist cannot envisage men who are situated in the asymmetrical idiom of the phallus. Okri constructs weak and emasculated men around Madame Koto because the hostile posture of culture and tradition can only be reworked through the emergence of an equally polemical feminist ideology.

Madame Koto is Okri's point of transition in the relations between men and women and the resultant synthesis critically reflects her efforts in undoing the oppressive old order. In effect, her explication of the ritual of human sacrifices (a crucial leitmotif in Okri's works) is to give it a new meaning by removing it from the oppressive experience of women and re-establishing it in patriarchy. The ritual structure that she inaugurates has the phenomenon of men being offered as human sacrifice instead of women. The narrator says:

People said the strangest things about the driver's death. But the notion that struck me most was something an old woman said. She told us that the driver

was a stand in death for Madame Koto, that he had died in her place. When she first voiced the notion people moved away from her. The idea had an infectious terror. But over and over again that day, before the new cycle of fighting broke out, we heard people whispering that Madame Koto, with her enormous and temporal powers, had transferred her own death to her poor driver. (205)

This incident is culturally anomalous because it is not in conformity with the practice of women being sacrificed. "Another woman, who had been taking a noticeable interest in Dad, told of how her sister was found floating on a stream, her head crowned in sacrificial beads" (The Famished Road 43). Yet only in such an insurrectional relationship between men and women is the identity of the woman likely to be liberated. Madame Koto epitomises a relationship of conflict but Okri would paint it as a progressive one since it has as its basis the alleviation of oppressive dichotomies.

Okri seems to posit that Madame Koto is not entirely a personification of the traditional femme fatale type, an incarnation of the demonic female, but rather a contestation of patriarchal rituals and histories. The writer reveals through Madame Koto's physical body and sexuality an awareness of the conflictual relationship between femininity and the phallocratic order. Her figure--size and physical strength--is resonant with a subversive consciousness. She does not readily fit in the stereotypes of acquiescent, pliable and self-effacing femininity. Instead she radiates the opposite and her whole body becomes the novelist's initial suggestion in his portrayal of the discordance between the genders. Thus it is power, a cardinal signifier of the masculine ideal, that her visage represents.

To reinforce this image, Okri brings out Madame Koto's sexuality in an equally controversial and non-conformist style. In the first place, through her childlessness, she departs from the rigid definition of the purpose of the woman's sexuality as maternal territory, a patriarchal designation, and stigma even. This creates impediments in the way society, especially the men and women, who are converts of patriarchy, relate with her. Her childlessness destroys the normal path of interaction, meaning that patriarchy has to acclimatise itself to a new way of expressing her being.

At another level, it is the physical outline and social purpose of her sexuality that engages patriarchy. In this case Okri draws Madame Koto in the form of the Medusan female whose sexuality threatens the phallus with consumption:

Her awesome desire, which had survived the penetrations of dream sorcerers who clambered up her spirit-body and got locked inside, and who were released only when they surrendered all their powers; her robust desire of years without much release drove her on obsessively, drove the yellow horse to distraction, as if it too were in pursuit of the great white mare maddened by an unearthly lust. I watched her go, her face contorted, her golden nightgown flapping and creating agonised noises in the air. And I had no idea of her destination, or who it was that could so arouse her mountainous desire, or who could satisfy it without getting lost, or drowned, or being swallowed altogether, or being crushed by the weight of her myth, or destroyed, burned to ashes by her volcanic consummation. (Songs of Enchantment 141)

Madame Koto's sexuality is therefore an embodiment of resisting the exploitation of women in a culture that equates women's sexuality to maternal responsibilities and the gratification of the phallus. In Paglia's words:

The femme fatale can appear as Medusan mother or as a frigid nymph, masquing in the brilliant luminosity of Apollonian high glamour. Her cool unreachability beckons, fascinates, and destroys. She is not a neurotic but, if anything, a psychopath. That is, she has a moral affectlessness, a serene indifference to the suffering of others, which she invites and dispassionately observes as tests of her power. (21)

Men cannot confront such a radicalisation of women's sexuality since it implies an invalidation of their own power. In her social environment, therefore, Madame Koto cannot be approached on the same principle of the man asserting the legitimacy of his patriarchal power and in the process subjugating the woman. Men who want to socialise with her have to concede to the powerful essence of her physical body and sexuality, and inevitably originate a more cautious approach. A man is warned:

‘This madame is going to be my wife!’ announced the bandaged thug.

He got up, swaying, and dragged her from behind the counter and danced with her.

‘That madame,’ said one of the men, ‘will swallow you completely.’ (The Famished Road 223)

There is palpable apprehension in the men as they interact with Madame Koto because she incarnates an oppositional reality. The Medusan figure is the antithesis of the phallus owing to its own claim to social power and centrality. To overcome Madame Koto's body is therefore akin to dismembering the constitution of assertive femininity, the search for reclaiming patriarchal power.

Hence although the blind old man has all along shared the same chaotic and mean vision of socio-political power with Madame Koto, his masculine principle remains restless until he kills her because her body possesses and personifies unequalled

power. "The blind old man was stabbing her too. Killing her" (Infinite Riches 317-18). This is an attack on her body in one sense but again it has the symbolism of assaulting a female edifice of power.

Madame Koto is at this moment on the threshold of transforming her perception of human relations from the point of view of the masculine principle to that of a more humane disposition, which threatens her partnership with the blind old man. The blind old man sees Madame Koto's imminent transformation as a denial of the masculine principle and retrogression into effeminacy, and must therefore be destroyed. As a wicked person, the blind old man--he recalls the villainous Shakespearean Iago--thrives on the possessiveness, power and the dominance of phallocratic structures. He does not only delight in the neurotic violence of the male psyche but also advocates disorder and the powerlessness of others. He says, "Fear is at the heart of power" (Songs of Enchantment 132).

Whereas Okri would want to show Dad as a humane and innocent male caught in social operations of phallocratic authority, he brings out the blind old man as its extremist realisation. Every conception in the old man's mind has a power implication that contradicts social justice and invites a consciousness that acclaims the subordination of women. His destruction of Madame Koto's body is because its constituents invoke the innate power of femininity. In other words, Okri demonstrates that the violence that the female body is socially prone to is meant to forestall the inclination toward a radical conceptualisation of femininity.

Foregoing is a critical interest in the perception and dramatisation of the attributes of patriarchy and lineaments of the masculine principle. The oppressive identity of

patriarchy and the orientation of masculinity in gendered relationships have been tenably confirmed. Accordingly, patriarchal conceptions foreground the insidiousness of masculine narcissism, a sensibility of self-affirmation that advocates power appropriation as an exclusive area.

This hegemonistic gender politics annuls social space for the feminine identity and consequently curtails its visibility in power dynamics. Through the possessive and coercive mechanisms inherent in the operations of the masculine principle, patriarchy ascends toward dominance thus consigning femininity into a lamentable state.

This has been amply vindicated in both domestic and public areas of permutation between male and female identities. The servility of the womenfolk (the pyramidal structure of the family, with the father perched at the apex as the infallible authority) in homes corresponds to their inconspicuous role in mediating the politics of public life. As such, defiant images of women that emerge against the backdrop of masculine hegemony lack the naturalness of femininity.

The survival and expression of pristine femininity becomes possible only when femininity is reduced to a replica of masculine peculiarities within the biological posturing of women. The archetypical woman has to enter the conventional cast of the man or retrogress into unpopular significations of femininity if her reality is to contest recognition. Therefore patriarchy is not just a restricted celebration of the subject position of men in social matrices but also a culture that pervasively seeks the limitation of the autonomy of the objects (femininity) by invading them and articulating within their bodies the sacrosanctness of male codes.

From the textual picture, though, the novelist appears to negate a unified patriarchal tradition. For as a young male Azaro retracts from social qualities of patriarchy and develops a disposition that procures the centrality of maternity. On the other hand, Dad personifies the patriarchal essence within and outside the home but later (after a process of continuous rebirth into heightened consciousness) allows the disintegration of this initial image as his vision searches for justice.

The novelist has suggested both the practicality of social constructs and the possibility of transformation should the genders embrace re-evaluated standpoints. Okri sees a dynamic state of interaction between the male and the female identities that the artist can redirect toward the promulgation of an egalitarian tradition. The next chapter therefore examines the novelist's paradigms in achieving this egalitarian tradition.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEW IMAGES AND CONSCIOUSNESS

This chapter examines the new paradigms that Okri suggests as possibilities in re-ordering gender relations. Having shown that polarities exist, the need for revision becomes inevitable. Yet this is a plane of reality that can only be vindicated if new images and consciousness are witnessed on the part of both women and men. Women who evolve towards a less constrained domestic environment and increased participation in public life highlight new images and consciousness. On the other hand the re-appraisal of the patriarchal ideology and its exclusive privileges should inform men's engagement with a reworked relational dispensation. The study anticipates a femininity that celebrates freedom without obstructing the woman's natural identity and men whose humanity is estranged from the enforcement of oppressive codes.

The novelist introduces new paradigms in the setting and individuality of the characters in order to bring about such a reconstitution of positions. Since gender is derivative of social categories, the novelist aims at dismantling impediments inherent in the socio-historical situation of the woman before he advances re-evaluated images.

In the case of Mum, the oppressive experience of her sociality has critical links with her traditional baggage as a mother and a wife, all inscribed within a conservative domesticity. Therefore in the reworked narrative of relational positions domesticity has to be overcome. Kimmel sees "social and economic changes transform the social institutions in which gender relations are negotiated (marriage, family, sexuality)"

(35). In accordance with traditional patriarchal norms, Mum's station in the gender dialogue has been the home but now she has to buttress herself as an actor of consequence within the public sphere. Her image is narrated, not in a language of passive participation or secondary involvement as an extension of Dad but as the authentic self in quest of authentic reality.

Mum is in a self-discovery enterprise that Okri endows with a structuring principle focused on repudiating ahistorical and domestic-centric identities. She exemplifies a narrative of gendered codes that can only be reimaged as she emerges from the subalterneity concomitant to womanhood into reinscription within the centre. As such, Okri begins the process of recreating Mum by severing her from the home as a mother, but more vitally from wifehood as the ultimate point in the victimhood of the domestic woman. Their roles are reversed:

That morning Dad cleaned out the room, swept the floor, scrubbed the walls and went to prepare food for the family. It was amazing to witness Dad's sudden domestication. The compound people stared at him in astonishment as he fetched water from the well and washed our clothes. They were particularly astounded at the concentration with which he washed Mum's undergarments. They stared with disbelief as he split firewood, and ground the pepper and tomatoes and melon seeds on our rough grinding stone. And they watched open-mouthed as he pounded the yams, his mighty chest heaving, and as he fried the meats, his eyes watching in the smoke filled kitchen. (*Infinite Riches* 123)

By reversing gender roles within the domestic arrangement, Okri explodes the myth of rigid social roles in agreement with the patriarchal dichotomy and at the same time

gives femininity a realisation of the identity of the other. Noticeably, Dad's domestication has reached a stage of appreciable refinement. He is no longer unseemly in his role, showing that attributes of the domestic environment normally associated with women are constructs that men can equally discharge. He had been this inept:

He was a dreadful cook. He would sit in the kitchen, surrounded by the bemused women of the compound, and try to light a fire. Instead he almost set the whole place alight. Using firewood which was still damp, pouring kerosene on the wood when a little strip of rolled paper would do, he plunged the entire compound into the pungent smoke of his ineptitude. The women, delighted at the novelty of dad in the kitchen, gathered and watched him from a distance, passing hilarious running commentaries on his disastrous attempts at cooking. But dad persisted and managed to burn everything he prepared, and succeeded in over-salting the stew, the yam and the beans. He ate in excellent spirits. I hardly ate at all. He didn't notice. He didn't notice anything except mum's presence on the bed. (Songs of Enchantment 67)

In either scenario, Mum remains distanced from servile domesticity. She is not an actor because to act within patriarchal prescriptions in the domestic environment would contradict the structuring principle of her rewritten narrative. As a victim of domestic norms, the widening chasm between her and these roles connotes her advancement towards freedom. Mum represents her emancipation from the patriarchal dogma when she is outside the kitchen.

Okri is exploring the possibility of valourising the hitherto circumscribed woman by giving her new textual loci. It is a counter-hegemonic strategy that annuls masculine dominance in the context of motherhood and wifehood definitions of femininity.

Importantly, Okri extricates Mum from the environment normally associated with womanhood without erasing her femaleness. The Mum who has swapped social positions with Dad still retains her feminine qualities. She still recognises Dad as her husband and seeks to protect him in this respect. "Mum cried out that the police had stolen her husband's vigorous brains" (*Infinite Riches* 65). In other words, Okri intimates a change in the roles prescribed for the female sex and their movement from their typical surroundings as the basis of reconceptualising gender relations.

The novelist seems to be negating notions that would want to vouch for any correspondence between the female person as a biological construct and her delivery of assigned roles. His argument is that even when located outside the usual environment the female body would still retain its attitudinal posture since this is independent of imposed duties in society.

A conspicuous element of contrast does emerge at this point between Mum and Madame Koto. Mum retains her female mould even when she exits from roles traditionally designated as areas for mothers and wives. Conversely, Madame Koto cannot survive, cannot invade and subvert patriarchal institutions, without a negation of her female image. Only when she is embedded in phallic qualities can she reverse the tragic meaning of patriarchal dominance. Ogude asserts that, "Women can still enter the entire male dominated areas and still remain entrapped within the male-

constructed identity of women as mere objects of sex and as naturally inferior" (116). Hence Okri's concern is to restore the identity of the female person without having to distort or disfigure the natural image that makes the female sex different. Leach says, "The real creed of the future is equal but not identical; diverse yet complimentary; the man for the woman and the woman for the man" (49). As an artist, Okri appears conscious of mistakes made by writers like Ngugi. Stratton faults Ngugi: "What Ngugi does is thus to reverse or simply convert stereotypical feminine qualities into equally stereotypical masculine ones" (162).

The quintessence of Okri's project is resident in his redefinition of woman as a social construct and not as a biological site. Okri inclines toward the prospects of the new woman existing within her womanhood but regaining hitherto inaccessible rights and emerging out of the oppressive conditions.

This explains why Mum's and Dad's textual journeys are in opposite directions in setting and role assignment. Dad departs from his privileged position of the subject to a site that debunks what patriarchy would inscribe in men both for the reason of demystifying the gender specificity of social locations and for affirming that masculinity as a biological subject does not necessarily disintegrate when men are outside the sphere of patriarchal canons.

Dad may not find his domestic situation acceptable to Azaro, who is used to the mother and, by implicit acknowledgement, the figure of a woman in these circumstances, but he is aware of the advantages of his new situation in reinventing his relationship with Mum. In searching for her forgiveness, he is in a quest for the

assertion of the relevance of the subaltern in the realm of the centre. This dialogical process can only succeed if Dad sees in Mum not the image of a self that replicates his own being but rather one that discloses to him the strengths and validity of the other.

“The point is that,” Ogude argues, “women’s liberation requires more than just the acquisition of masculine values, even with the best intentions on the part of the writer” (116). A realistic reworking of gender relations fails to be successfully predicated when men encounter women marked as men in the re-negotiation of polarities. What inhibits Dad’s possible disenchantment with his new location in the domestic set-up (the source of his exuberance in the kitchen) is the awareness that it is an act that purges him of the wrongs against Mum as wife and mother, not as some phallic construct.

Dad’s domestic position is voluntary, completely lacking the strains, reluctance and the general disinclination that characterise his response to the bidding of Madame Koto in whatever social situation. He is described as:

Enchanted, dad kept staring at her as if she had once again become the very image of his first love. Mum rose from her long sleep and bore herself with the serenity of a princess.... Dad changed. He woke early, went off to work reluctantly, and rushed back earlier than normal.... For days dad spoke to her tenderly, self-abasingly even, but she remained within the nimbus of her silence. (Songs of Enchantment 73)

Why other novelists yield to disillusionment in trying to eradicate gender inequalities is because they seek to surmount the genesis of the polarities through a feminisation

of men or the masculinisation of women, which in both cases produce artistically inelegant results. In giving the centre and the margin a new rationale for engagement, Okri shuns the co-option or honorary status strategy. The novelist refutes the aesthetic merit in creating female characters who evolve into being conscious of and asserting their selfhood but have the masculine streak in their personality.

Similarly, Okri remodels the customary persuasion that inclines towards effeminate men whose inconspicuous position is as a result of coercive femininity. Mum is not brusque in her manoeuvres yet Dad finds the moral *raison d'être* to make concessions. His entry into domesticity prompts no less cognition than self-discovery as the underlying political project of the writer. The ideology in ascendance aims at legitimating reversed roles since they are neither imposed nor do the actors in these new positions lack the support of their typical mould as men or women. Men retain their masculine identity but are effective in responsibilities that would otherwise testify to estrangement from patriarchy. On their part, women evolve an assertive appropriation of the self without seeking valourisation through masculine traits. They are not honorary men but rather typical women forging a new identity under circumstances that would historically express their peripheral status. "All around, a new world was being erected amidst the old" (The Famished Road 113). "New worlds were bursting out of the egg-shells of a million mutinous dreams" (Songs of Enchantment 26).

As a result, in his revision of canonical gender postulations, Okri is cognisant of the need to regenerate both the aesthetic vision and the modes of thought encoded in the process of characterisation. The traditional perspective whereby the sole alternative

for the oppressed woman is to repulse oppressive realities through degeneration (the prostitution motif) encounters a justifiable violation in Okri's approach. He creates Mum both as the textual antithesis to Madame Koto who imitates the operations of patriarchy in order to challenge it, and as an exposition of the lacuna in the binary logic carried in the sexism of the male versus the female. According to Lebbady:

What is involved, in fact, is not a matter of conforming to a predefined category whether it be that of gender, race, or nation, but of taking the process of construction into one's own hands in an effort to go beyond those categories and creatively come to terms with a new identity that transgresses the boundaries set by those in the centre. This would require dismantling the logic either/or and adhering to a different logic; it could involve conforming to the logic neither/ both. (4)

The novelist finds germane to his overall social vision the presence of characters who depict transcendent social meanings rather than restrictive gender categories. Dad, whom the patriarchal tradition would consider deconstructed, becomes a communicative site that has harnessed Okri's commitment to an equitable social order. This is a position that the writer takes to gesture his moral convictions and which is informed by an idealism that is realised once Okri's new woman enters the dynamism and intriguing complexity of renegotiating her public role.

The idea is that innovating a model male figure within the domestic parameters ought to be differentiated from strategies that would guarantee the possibility of co-existence in the public domain. As the process of transformation evolves from the narrow space of the home, where gender divisions and norms are predicated on supposedly inviolable attitudes, into the fluid public arena, the survival of the

reworked relationship between the genders is contingent upon the self-apprehension of the new woman since she is the one to reclaim the status of centrality. Granted, a radical accent is necessary on the part of the new woman in order to dysfunction patriarchal consciousness both at the level of the individual and in the institutions and discourses circulated to construct public reality.

Women cannot achieve the object of liberatory politics in public life via the propitiatory tokenism of the patriarchal order. Though the ultimate goal is to establish a rapprochement of mutual co-existence, strides towards this goal have to engender echoes of strength and feminist tenacity in confronting historical impediments. However, Okri warns against unrefined efforts towards the re-drawing of the female as a public actor. "A woman, fat and rich-looking in expensive lace, was ordering a lot of men around. She looked very powerful and had an expression of distilled scorn on her face as she commanded the men to take her baggage from the boot of a taxi" (The Famished Road 146).

Projected from this stance, the reimagining of the public woman becomes confrontational and serves to heighten masculine possessiveness and the sacrosanctness of the male creed. The rejoinder would be this kind of reactionary opposition:

‘She wants all the power.’

‘To become a goddess.’

‘To rule us.’

‘Make us servants for ever.’

‘Turn us into animals.’

‘Chickens.’

‘Goats.’

‘Rats.’

‘Sheep.’

‘Cows.’

‘For sacrifice.’

‘To take our power.’

‘...kill her.’

‘Yes, let’s kill her.’

‘Before she becomes a god.’ (Infinite Riches 310)

How then can women aspire to visibility in the power structures without being cast as being anathema to the status quo that enshrines the eminence of patriarchy and its monolithic tendencies? Typical patriarchal narcissism is oriented towards the essentialist ideology, the subject (us) versus the object (them) relationship that precludes both the androgynous solution and the equal but different option. Yet there has to be a replacement of the existing dichotomies, a rewriting of the sensibilities that endow gender with a binary scheme.

The *raison d’être* asserting fresh interpretive parameters in gender relations is not based on empowered women against disempowered men, as patriarchal chauvinism would portray it. Certain residual realities in the intercourse between the genders, and which transcend binaries, would have to be preserved. Mum cannot, for instance, repudiate her wife and mother image in her interaction with Dad and Azaro respectively. If anything, the literal import of the names of these characters makes the triangular relationship of father, mother and son evident and ineffaceable.

However, Mum has to renew her image in this relationship by establishing for herself a sense of autonomy that is not necessarily antagonistic. She will remain a mother and a wife but she will denounce servility and gain recognition as an equal and through her own innate drive, accord the recognition a pragmatic meaning. Mum's autonomy and the overall sense of being at the centre needs concretisation through actions that signal the chasm separating victimhood from assertive selfhood.

More importantly, such actions need not be rigidly directed towards women's liberatory thinking. By looking at the social phenomenon in its entirety, not just dwelling on the traditional sites of women's marginality, however critical, the new women that Okri envisages are a viable strategy in redirecting the relationship. Both the new woman and the new man are equipped with a transcendental consciousness, a perception of their position as pedestal elevations that are geared toward an indiscriminate re-ordering of the panorama below them. This imbues their voices with moral authority and the power to fuse and personify coalesced genders.

In a way, though, Okri recognises that the elevated consciousness of a single woman can only be translated into practicable ideals if she has the background of a similarly conscientised group of women. Lorber observes that, "It is a paradox of feminist politics that women must act politically as a group in order to defuse gender as a discriminative status" (58). According to Okri, it would appear as if the collective image of women is an inevitable response to phenomena that enjoy almost universal approval.

Since patriarchy has permeated virtually all social institutions, a confrontation that does not encompass the sensibilities of all oppressed categories might not be meaningful in initiating a transformative totality. Moreover, the strategy of collective involvement would bear the credibility of public ownership of the struggle and hence forestall the alien aspect in the emergent woman. But since there has to be a voice that disciplines and unites the womenfolk, considering the heterogeneous character of feminism or the “feminisms” of feminism, the all-inclusive approach finally tapers into a representative individual. Hence whereas Mum stands out as Okri’s authorial preference in articulating the politics of self-apprehension and resistance, the old woman is the writer’s representative at the level of deconstructing biases, falsehoods and subjective assumptions encoded in history. On her part, Madame Koto is Okri’s symbolic insertion of the womenfolk into economic institutions and the explosion of myths that celebrate the invincibility of patriarchy.

The novelist centrestages three strong women in the trilogy, each of them typifying a different dimension in the writer’s thesis of presenting rewritten gender discourses. However, despite Cheal’s argument that “the solidarity that women achieve within their networks produces a female consciousness, rather than a feminist consciousness,” (91) Okri does not exclude other women from the efforts of the representative trio. Indeed, apart from Madame Koto, whose rise into a symbolic position is insular and veritably phallic, Mum and the old woman have their ideological provenance rooted in the consciousness, support and acceptance of others. Consequently, Okri’s representative woman does not preside over a docile lot but rather women who are fully aware of their social situation. “They all had children strapped to their backs. The ways of women: I learned a lot about what was

happening in the country through them. I learned about the talk of independence, about how the white men treated us, about political parties and tribal divisions" (The Famished Road 75-76).

From this position of knowledge, the women can undoubtedly take part in remoulding their lives as individuals and as active and self-driven participants in a drama of collective protest. Azaro says:

We were heroes in our own drama, heroes of our own protest. There were pictures of us, men and women and children, standing helplessly round heaps of the politicians' milk. There were pictures of us raging, attacking the van, rioting against the cheap methods of politicians, humiliating the thugs of politics, burning their lies. (156)

Okri lends authenticity to these women by giving them a position of voice in the struggle without divesting them of their status as mothers and wives. "They talked about their children or their husbands or about the forthcoming elections" (156). Through mothers and wives, Okri successfully alters the alienation of these categories of women from the core of liberatory politics.

The novelist seeks to demonstrate that, contrary to widely circulated stereotypes, motherhood and wifedom are not apolitical statuses that play inconsequential roles in redressing the unequal relationship between the genders. This is a decisive attempt at reinstating motherhood and wifedom within the centre, making them cease being viewed as positions that epitomise the Other and drawing them into the reality of the subject. Indeed Mum's development as a political actor emanates from her position as wife before it expands into a larger conceptual framework that is not just about her

husband but the broad and complex constellation of moral and socially contested standpoints. Initially, Mum set out to rescue her husband, Dad, who had been incarcerated for the alleged murder of the carpenter. "When she heard that Dad had been arrested for the murder of the carpenter whom he had been brave enough to bury, she immediately set out on the road again. She sang a song which appeared joyful, but which was actually seamed with anger" (Infinite Riches 20).

Okri's achievement here is the presentation of a character who is selfless in the sense that her struggle is not linked to immediate feminist goals but who eventually emerges as a critical precept in validating feminist consciousness. Mum's intention is to gain the freedom of Dad hence hers cannot outrightly be depicted as a feminist agenda. However the pro-woman awareness that indirectly results from this action is when her search for the husband becomes a quest for an understanding and amelioration of social issues that transcend the individual case of Dad. And since she is involved in a quest that highlights broader societal sentiments, she becomes the focal point around which other women solidify their own forms of protest and are released from inaction into focused acts of ascendancy into the subject position. This is how she impacts on their consciousness:

The women followed her, urging her to rest, to recover properly, but Mum pushed on. Her unaccountable single-mindedness magnetized the women. Without knowing why, they accompanied her, as if they were all on the same angry pilgrimage.... Mum did not speak to the women who accompanied her. She spoke to the road and the air and the wind, complaining about the relentless injustice of the world, singing snatches of defiant village songs. In stirring her spirit, she stirred the women. And the women, chanting and

singing, caught the interest of other women who sold beans and roasted corn and fruits along the bustling roadsides. Eternally curious, endlessly harassed by history, the women of the roadside joined the surging mass of women.

Their numbers swelled, their flow directed by Mum's anger. (21-22)

Thus Mum remains the structuring principle responsible for the unity and vision of the womenfolk in their revolutionary internalisation of the nuances of social justice. The discontent and disenchantment has been there but the vision and gravitas to turn them into a movement of protest was lacking.

Okri correlates positions of victimhood with the inevitability of conscientisation so as to persuade the feminist stance, especially the radical and separatist proponents, about the viability and social credibility of attaining an autonomous identity that does not necessarily conflict with femininity. Motherhood and wifhood alone as social locations do not circumscribe femininity within an environment of negated selfhood but rather it is the consciousness attributed to this positions that would either predetermine centrality or marginality. When Okri underscores the heterogeneity of the women's movement, more as actors within the socio-political spectrum than as exemplars of feminist thinking, he tends to emphasise the particularity of the contribution harnessed from the motherhood standpoint also. Consider their forceful contribution to the struggle:

At the main road I saw the wild women again. Their voices were intensely chanting new things into being. Widening the spaces for better realities. Extending the womb of the world. I recognised some of the women...They were the perpetual mothers, the great virgins, the somnolent widows, mothers of priests and criminals, mothers of the endlessly poor, mothers of beggars

and cripples, prostitutes and cloth-dyers, mothers of the strong and the timid, the cunning and the weak, all intoxicated by the incarnation of the new god. (296-97)

In this case motherhood is equated to suffering in the context of social misfortunes and therefore renders the protest of the women legitimate. The women are not just concerned about the specificity of their status as victims in society but rather encapsulate the universal cry for social justice as the rationale for their actions. The narrator says:

The newspaper said they weren't quite able to make out the grievances of the women, but listed complaints of malnutrition, poor social services, hospitals that didn't treat their children, governors who don't listen, inequality before the law, and above all the case of the man who was arrested--without being charged--for the public good of burying a dead body festering at a street corner. (35)

Mum's concerns as the leader and personification of the new woman makes the social platform of the movement even more compelling. She encompassed such ideas:

I heard amazing stories of Mum addressing crowds of bewildered women. She spoke in six languages. She spoke of freedom, and of justice, which she said was the language of women. She spoke of independence and of an end to tribalism. She spoke of the unity of all women who have to bring children into this world made difficult by selfish men. She spoke of all the things she had been silent about. She talked of the special way of the African women, their way of intervening, their way of balancing, of turning hatred into friendship, their talent for redemption, their long memory for histories and secrets that men too quickly forget, their gift of nourishing, of healing, of making good

things grow, their secret ways of undermining, their great love of mankind.

(36-37)

As the entry points into the new reality of women with regard to social vision, the writer has developed Mum into a state that reveals her readiness to grasp freedom in the domestic situation, transform this into the mandate for social action and ultimately bring about the voice of women in the historical process of politics and the formation of the nation.

It is quite evident that Mum attains the political edge when she is involved in the crusade for social justice. When she leads her mobilised women to the police station, her anger and bitterness are about the injustice of imprisoning not just her husband but also a man whose laudable act is criminalised under the unjust social system. However, and indeed an inadvertent achievement at this formative stage of her political stirring, Mum's effort, together with the invigorated state of other women, accomplishes an iconising identity in the context of the nation's liberation movement and quest for political autonomy. They show their political force:

The poor sergeant-major looked up and found himself overrun by a scary-looking mob of women, all in their different cracked voices demanding the release of husbands, sons, in-laws, brothers, fathers, uncles and the missing sons of their friends...a new war of liberation had been launched. (22)

It thus appears that women inaugurate a nationalist consciousness in narrating the colonial situation and freedom discourses. It is the militant upsurge of the women's political character that restores even the freedom of the intellectual lot whose opposition to the political system could not succeed because of typical academic

idealism, as contrasted with the practical and spontaneous onslaught of the women.

The academics had been this outspoken and idealistic:

The cells were bursting with faces that were like forest carvings and raw-eyed sculptings...faces of university professors who had woken up from their idealistic dreams to find the promises of independence betrayed in advance, and who had spoken out with all the brashness of those unused to the brackish waters of politics. (22-23)

On the part of the women who have emerged from an apolitical background, their triumph in injecting into the political system a sense of urgent progress toward freedom means self-discovery, and they would want the new war of liberation, based on Mum's vision, to get more purposive in its onslaught against the political system. Her leadership galvanised them into such a militant mood:

Her simple search had undammed so much chaos. All around her the women were revelling in the new dimensions of their power. They sang and spoke boldly.... The women around her, some of them quite mad, others spoiling for a confrontation, planned their next invasion, their next assault on the political structure. (24)

Her political consciousness has become the women's wake up call at the country's moment of political transition. "Mum called on the women of the unborn nation to stage a mighty strike, and to protest for independence" (36). Certainly, this is a call to women not just to agitate for the nation's rebirth into a postcolonial identity but also to get embedded in the forces of political transformation so that the resultant political reality does not portray them as subalterns anymore. Kaplan says:

A dominant discourse positions women in certain ways of which they are not conscious; only when they band together to take up arms against some

particular hardship, suffering or frustration may women begin to be aware of the codes that limit and confine them. (16)

Okri seems to be viewing the totality of the women's protest as an allegorical presentation of the nation in its search for autonomy. In fact Okri juxtaposes the struggles of women in the political domain of the nation with a new and less restrained spirit of self-assertion in their domestic location because reforms in the private and public domains of womanhood intertwine to produce the new woman. "Women of our street, noticing how their comrades were seizing the national stage in acts of boldness, became quarrelsome, and staged strikes against their husbands" (36). The insurrectional mood has thus come to bear on the peripheral recognition of women in the area of domesticity.

The novelist wants to highlight the linkages between the various facets of gender conflict, arguing that they do not only interrelate but would catalyse each other for the emergence of an all-embracing environment of self-affirmation for the womenfolk. In consequence, when Mum attains the symbolic status of a national political lodestar, having assimilated into her vision the domestic reality and the social predicament of the people, women still trapped in the traditional restrictions of domesticity interpret her position to mean greater value for their role in the home. They do not just revolt against their husbands for the simplistic reason of replicating the national struggle but rather they are concerned about the nature and essence of an accommodative public life in the context of its transference into reworking new relationships in the home.

Okri is depicting the multifaceted question of gender inequalities and hence the inevitability of a similarly multifaceted remedial strategy. He aims at suggesting

prominent voices of women both in the home and outside it so as to synthesise a complete picture of women who are free. The revolt against husbands, as a trickle down effect of the public insurrection, indicates the authority that women have hitherto never appropriated owing to the dominance of patriarchy in the home. The object of this domestic cataclysm is not the husband in isolation but rather the male figure as a position of unequal authority and the depository of an oppressive culture in the domestic setting.

Equally, the strident criticism that informs the women's approach to the question of colonial history and independence has nothing to do with the Governor-General as an individual but as a representative of the colonial order. "The women wanted to storm the Governor-General's door. They wanted to create a new parliament" (Infinite Riches 40). The women's agitation for a new parliament is illustrative of their yearning for reformed institutions of power in society. And although the immediate rationale for this would be the need to correct hostile assumptions fabricated to validate the colonial system, women would undoubtedly press for institutions that accommodate the particularity of their experiences.

Since parliament embodies the individual's voice in expressing social ideals, women want a new parliament so as to attain a communicative presence in the historical narrative. This amounts to the subaltern wanting to speak as a prerequisite for the reimagining of her identity in the cumulative historical process. Women are conscious of their marginality and since they have now acquired a political status, they would want this to have a dimension that acknowledges their relevance in according the nation a new gender and historical identity.

Dad, unlike other followers of the women's movement, is aware of how their struggle to free him has embodied broader historical meanings. Therefore he readily accepts the heroic status of Mum, resisting views by others that he was the hero in this drama that has intermingled public protest with a new and assertive femininity. He is their hero until he refutes their plaudits:

As they neared our house, the people of the street began to recognize Dad. A great cry of jubilation rang around the houses, and the news was passed from mouth to mouth. People stopped what they were doing and rushed at him. The cry of his homecoming preceded his advance. Children ran to him, singing out his nickname. Soon the whole weary group were besieged by the people of the street. Voices hailed Dad, calling him a hero. (68)

This distorted presentation of historical experiences is declarative of the obsession with the notion of history as an exclusive repertoire that has no idioms indicative of the critical role of women. Dad refuses this misrepresentation (he has epitomised himself as the purveyor of justice) and reinstates Mum to her authentic achievement in correcting the social system and elevating women to speak from the subject position. The drama of the moment was total and historic:

Terrified by Dad's zomboid vacancy, she was fleeing and screaming when a powerful voice, part thunderous, part demonic, made her stop, as if paralysed. Then to our astonishment, Dad swooped down on her and roughly bundled her on his shoulder, in an act rather crudely proclaiming her the true returning hero. (69-70)

This becomes a way of mobilising others to change in their perception of Mum and her social identity:

With his face sweating and impassive he came up the street, and the crowds surged round him again hailing Mum in sweet songs, embellishing her legend of a woman who brought the city to its knees and defied the might of the administration and freed prisoners from the dark holes of injustice. The seven women joined the triumphal procession, and sang loudly of a new era of women's liberty. (70)

The volte-face that street crowds make in recognising Mum as the true heroine of the protest movement reveals the fact that although men would traditionally hog the limelight as major actors, women also generate a new mode of experiences that signal social justice and freedom in society. Okri has thus not just attempted to restore women to their deserved position in the historical narrative but has also debunked the version designed to celebrate patriarchy in history even when men are invisible.

At this point the novelist is interrogating the unequal representation of women in national struggles and the tendency to obscure feminist militancy whose overall goal enjoins even those interests stereotyped as masculine preserves. Okri seems to propose that feminist militancy at times transcends gender and becomes a necessary, impartial and assertive form of social protest. Therefore since it is women's thinking and motivation that underpins societal dialectics, it is only fair that they occupy the subject status.

The elimination of women's marginality after they have fought and transformed the perspective of history has the merit of validating their disinterested agenda as credible for bringing about the ideal sociality. The correction that Okri makes in this regard is that feminist projects at times stand for the entire societal ideological statement and

should therefore not be appropriated as limited and sexualised statements. Again, though a movement initiated by a woman and spontaneously energised through the support of other women would have the quality of feminist articulations of womanhood tropes, such organisational strategies need not divorce the movement from the broad social agenda. Okri has demonstrated that women, even when acting as a body of shared biological and social traits, are capable of responding to challenges outside what would be emphasised as a projection of feminist thinking. While enacting their form of protest, it becomes idealistic and inauthentic to gloss over experiences that are female specific but this does not compel the novelist to crystallise the consciousness of women into a one-track activity. He talks of the liberty of women but this is in fact shown as being enjoined in their overall plan of expressing disenchanted social positions regardless of gender.

However, Okri neither romanticises his women in their achievements nor does he struggle to present a homogenous identity of female consciousness. In his project of upliftment, reworking the traditional apprehension of gender to propound the possibility of equitable relationships, Okri continually appreciates the practicality of schisms within the women's movement. He sees class and general ideals of women's social milieu as the genesis of their failure to reinscribe themselves within the ideology of the centre. "The new women distorted the rage of the originals, confused them with orderly plans, with decent processions. The new women with their new words were largely successful" (40).

The contradictions within the body politic of feminist thinking that Okri is interrogating have to do with women's divergent approaches to contesting their

oppressive experiences. On one hand, there is the movement of street women that draws its conscientisation from the spontaneity and ideologically rugged actions of Mum. This group has no intervention of formal education in its operations, they are devoid of a sense of order or decency but are strongly bonded together by their common goal and their militant mood is only because they have a compelling and socially relevant objective at the core of their actions. On the other hand, there are women whose hallmark is elitism. They aspire to orderliness and decency but they have the negative trait of being alienated, egoistic and consumed by opportunism.

Okri has underscored this schism in order to interrogate the choices that underlie liberatory feminism. Is it possible for women to espouse radical female consciousness and achieve the ultimate goal of engendering a new sociality? Or they have to accept the validity of the status quo and operate within its confines?

There is again the question of the group and the individual in the context of women clamouring for an audible position in the gender discourse. The women of the streets have crystallised their action into group consciousness, they represent the whole corpus of womanhood as a discontented and protest site. On the contrary, the elite women mirror individual strivings and a fragmented portrayal of the woman's status. This group is in conflict with the methods of the former because the street eruption has mobilised a broad array of women's typical sensitivities and solidified them into a platform for action. And because this method overlooks special class interests and the identity of the individual within that class, the elite women find it inconsistent with their location of marginality but within the centre. Yet since they understand the dynamics of conflict and modern institutional determinants of power and social

visibility, the elite women succeed at a time when the truly representative segment of women experience disillusionment. Mum is bitter and frustrated:

We learned that the leader of the elite women had become a politician and an official candidate for one of the political parties. Mum became bitter because the elite women had somehow entered a higher zone of public life on the basis of three days of her agony. She was bitter, but she didn't know what to be bitter about.... Somehow she felt a new life, a greater opportunity, a new freedom had been snatched from her. She felt that a door had been shut on her new possibilities. The seven women came often to discuss, to plan; but with the birth of the famous Society of Women headed by the elite group, with all the interest they had generated in the newspapers, their fund-raising events, their highly publicized speeches and well-organized demonstrations, their meetings with members of the government, what chance did eight women from eight different ghettos stand? Their meetings in our little room turned into squabbles and power struggles. The group splintered. They quarrelled endlessly. Their friendship turned sour and then the whole idea died and then they stopped coming to our place. (*Infinite Riches* 86)

In this picture, Okri presents a realistic appraisal of the women's movement and therefore advances suggestions on how the movement can overcome impediments to giving womanhood a new status in gender dialectics. Having acknowledged the discrepancies in ideology and methodology, the novelist seems to posit that ideas embraced by a female consciousness or feminist agenda are contingent upon and largely reflect the social background of the women. Consequently, the novelist prescribes equally variegated paradigms in apprehending and resolving womanhood as a marginal identity and powerless category.

The experiences of women are differentiated through the degree of access to education and general proximity to the modern culture of social negotiation. The elite women have had access to education and therefore their criteria for evaluating the experiences of women differ from that of the ghetto women, meaning they would also see their distinct identity in terms of instruments that they assign to the objective of their enhanced role in public life. They are thus cautious in their approach because they are already partly within the dominant patriarchal precincts, only that they now want to create a women-specific projection of this dominance.

The ghetto women, unbuttressed in education, have an experience that favours different modalities in acquiring a position within the dominant culture before they can propound a feminist contestation. Yet although their criteria in reimagining womanhood are not controlled by intellectual propriety and their protest paradigms remain largely amorphous, their actions reverberate well beyond the confines of class and acquire a quality of authenticity that the elite women fail to evoke through their disciplined methodology.

Okri is thus arguing out a preferred remedial strategy in obliterating the subaltern status if the majority of women whose experiences exemplify womanhood as victimhood are to realise new possibilities. In fact the feminism of the elite women, which is the consequence of a brainwashing education, is satirised by the novelist for its disruptive influence on the consciousness of the truly oppressed woman. The writer stresses the elite women's obsession with orderliness and decency in order to elicit resentment and disapproval. Azaro bewails the disillusionment of the ghetto women:

I was very sad when the seven women stopped coming. They brought activity, twelve languages, strange philosophies, and many interesting dishes of food with tastes like the memory of a rich dream in our mouths. They brought hope and activity and argument and lovely voices. They had dreams of improving the lives of women, dreams of getting the government to change our society's perception of women, of creating better hospitals, and setting up schools and universities to educate women for the best jobs the land had to offer. Their dreams were chaotic and related to their experiences and they always argued. But they argued with lots of food in the house. They talked a great deal about politics and they made the word take on a better taste, like the taste of succulent mangoes or sun ripened oranges. (87)

Okri sees greater validity in the methods and concerns of truly subaltern women as opposed to the interpretation of the womanhood subject and restatement modalities circulated within the elitist grouping. The subaltern women can form a visionary attack on their oppressive conditions since they will have developed their consciousness and *modus operandi* in consonant with genuine historical circumstances.

Thus despite the disillusionment that assails the ghetto women's movement, Okri does not allow it to symbolise the invalidity of female consciousness. The dimension that the novelist's thesis of women achieving new consciousness and images takes from this point of a failed mass strategy is to explore possibilities of individual women whose actions dramatise women, the nation and history. Unlike the elitist woman whose egoism impedes the manifestation of women's collective assertion, the individual woman, whom Okri approximates to an allegorical embodiment of the

nation and its institutions, has the capacity to articulate her individuality as an encapsulation of the thinking of the entire womenfolk. This is the textual role of both Madame Koto and the old woman. They are individual women who achieve results for all other women without having immediately involved them in the struggle.

This opinion apparently succeeds because contrary to Mum's attempts at accommodating both the specific pro-female agenda and broader question of social justice, Madame Koto and the old woman have their definitive attributes resident in single ideas. Madame Koto wants to narrate women's economic history while on the other hand the old woman is inclined towards the African tradition and the aftermath of colonial experience. Madame Koto's phenomenal status as a woman of immense and bumptious economic energy is exemplified through her fabled wealth. "One or two men owned scooters and were accorded the respect only reserved for elders and chieftains. But it most certainly was news for a woman in the area to own a car" (The Famished Road 377). She has set a precedent that gives her a magnified image in the community. "What mattered was that yet again she had been a pioneer, doing something no one else had done. People became convinced that if she wanted she could fly over the ghetto on the back of a calabash" (380). From this position of economic power, she gains admission to the subject position and can play an instrumental role in the unfolding political struggle. But again this is what alienates Madame Koto both from men who perceive her as the totality in challenging patriarchy and the majority of the womenfolk who find her phallic portrait antithetical.

However, Okri seeks to incarnate in the person of Madame Koto not just the individual woman's painful process of self-affirmation through assertive strategies but also the nation as an abiku phenomenon that goes through a conflictual history and again regenerates to fulfil the aspirations of its people. Madame Koto sees her identity as the interface where forces of the nation's history have interacted in the search for a rebirth and should therefore be absolved of individual responsibility for her prominent status that affects other societal interests. She is the nation going through conflicts of ideology as the drive for renewal gains momentum. Her personage intertwines with the history of the nation, the divisions within it and a hostile colonial reality. She asks:

Which one of you can talk to white people in their sleep and listen to their plans of making us smaller while they get bigger, eh? Which one of you can bear the responsibility of power, can fight off all the demons of the poor, tame the devils of the rich, ride the colonised air of the country? Which one of you, I want to know, can do battle with the six hundred and fifty two spirits chaining up our future with a single diamond key, a key thrown into the deepest parts of the Atlantic where the bones of a sunken continent dream our history backwards as if it cannot be improved? (Infinite Riches 31)

The martyr image evoked here cannot be mistaken. Okri does not just give women a pedestal position in history through the self-sacrificing actions of Madame Koto. He is also looking at intertextuality and trying to give women, as the traditionally enshrined object of sacrifice, a new meaning. Women would traditionally be sacrificed to purge communities of malevolent visitations of the deity but in this case Okri reworks the sacrifice paradigm to give the victim immortality in narrating the nation. This is the abiku element in Madame Koto's personality and indeed what

embodies her with a multifaceted capacity to deliver textual meanings. She transforms her own experience, the experience of the women and the nation. From her point of view it would appear the initiative that the individual woman takes in the perspective of her re-evaluated life creates improved conditions for the upliftment and general reconceptualisation of womanhood. Her experience affirms that history is a transformative process into which women should insert their identities.

The death of Madame Koto is metaphorical and transitional. Other than continuing the sacrifice and martyr motif her death announces renewal and optimism. Okri uses the strategy of authorial intrusion to ask: "Where does a birth begin? It begins with a death. Things have to vacate the space we haven't properly used, in order for new things to be born" (223). At this plane of thought, Madame Koto's legendary existence signals a national history in the process of change. Thus Okri aims at renewing women in their personal lives or social attitudes and also their relationship with historical forces which have customarily been stereotyped as estranging the woman's voice in giving history sensitivity to the feminist perspective.

Madame Koto's death is also presented to bring into view the impact of her struggles in the lives of women. These are women who are trapped in oppressive conditions but, through the efforts of Madame Koto, they regain their selfhood and make a triumphant re-entry into life. Witness their coming for her burial:

Madame Koto's followers had fled but her earliest women, many of them prostitutes, returned. They had all gone on to become prominent figures in the society. Some had married judges, politicians and army generals. Many of them were entirely successful in their own right.

All the originals, who had been at the most discernible beginnings of her myth had come back, like returning daughters. They had left their husbands and children for the duration of the funeral. They had left their thriving concerns, famous restaurants and high-class salons where traders from Beirut, jewellers from Antwerp, Indian tycoons and beautiful women congregated, had scandalous parties and did excellent business. These original women of Madame Koto's bar had left their estates, their farms, their cloth-dyeing concerns, their shops and kiosks, to come and participate in the obsequies for the great woman who had opened their roads for them. They had all prospered. And they had all the shadow of secret hues and fetishes beneath their impeccable make-up.

All the original women were there. The innocent virgins who had fled from tyrannical fathers, from dreadful backwaters where people were thrown into brackish creeks to see if they were witches. Young women who had fled the rapes committed on them by uncles, or fathers' friends. The girls who had fled stifling provinciality, the immemorial superstitious, the crushing negativity of isolated villages. Others who had fled from convents and were quickly trained in the art of seduction. All those who had fled from crude religions, from a life of drudgery to a life of city dreams. The faithful ones of the earliest times. They had all returned. And they prepared the feast, cleaned Madame Koto's rooms, organized the orderly dismantling of her realm, and determined for her an honourable funeral, because they knew that great old trees are impossible to replace. (362-64)

Madame Koto has thus been the women's voice in asserting their economic freedom and defiance of traditions that specifically exploited them. She does not initiate a popular movement like the insurrection predicated on Mum's political consciousness but her engagement with societal forces has produced a new generation of women. The women who come to pay their homage to Madame Koto are those who symbolise the transition in womanhood from victimhood to selfhood. Women previously trapped in dehumanising roles like prostitution make their homecoming as actors within mainstream socio-economic realms. These recreated women are projected in conformity to the principle of giving women a new plane of reality, which informs Okri's understanding of womanhood and the feasibility of the position of the female sex in a transformed society.

Madame Koto may have staged her protest in a problematic way by assuming a phallic disposition but the outcome of her actions, the new woman who has an economic position and who defies patriarchy in its anti-woman traditions, restores her identity to be celebrated in liberatory gender politics. That Madame Koto has reconciled her image to female consciousness, being identified as a voice of advocacy in the commonalties that engender a feminist bonding, is attested to by the intermediary responsibility that she assumes on her death. Both men and women cling to her posthumous possibilities:

Addressing the regally seated Madame Koto, the women and cultists prayed to her to pass messages on to their ancestors, and to intercede for them in the world of spirits. Childless women prayed to be made pregnant. Men whose businesses weren't doing well asked for success. Kneeling in fervent pleas, the supplicants implored their ancestors to grant them prosperity and health,

longevity and happiness. They asked that evil never enter their lives. They prayed that their feet would never go astray on life's road. They asked for protection from seen and unforeseen eventualities. And they begged that their lives be rich with blessings. They addressed all their claims and their problems, their hopes and their fears, to Madame Koto, whom they saw as their best advocate in the powerful realm of the dead.... The greatness of her myth gave certainty to the supplicants that she would deliver all their messages and intercede on their behalf to the mighty divinity. (373)

The death of Madame Koto is an abiku phenomenon since it leads to the continuity of her legend in the mythical universe. This is also a strategy that Okri relies on in exploding the exclusivity of the spiritual as a patriarchal domain. By empowering Madame Koto to communicate or dialogue with the spiritual realm on behalf of the living, Okri is aware of the contradiction attendant to this role but permits it because it refigures women as a recognisable presence within the interspaces or spiritual universe. The novelist is consciously resisting the stereotype of an assumed clash between womanhood and the spiritual realm, womanhood as anathema and only fit to interact with the supernatural as victims of purgatorial rituals. The writer has advanced his empowerment of the female role by assigning to it a representative function within the metaphysical. Madame Koto is not only asked to intercede for women over their specific problem sites like childlessness but also to encompass the aspirations and needs of men such as economic success.

To use death as an empowering phenomenon and one that alleviates the oppressive experiences of womanhood puts Okri in a novel aesthetic and artistic position. It is this aesthetic novelty that creates shared traits between Madame Koto and the old

woman whose textual presence narrates the woman's alienation and the struggle to re-affirm her as a legitimate historical site.

The old woman has a quality of immortality embodied in Madame Koto when she is given a life of responsibilities beyond corporeal capacities. Both Mum and Madame Koto operate within normal temporal and spatial paradigms, with the exception of the moment when Madame Koto is articulated within the regenerative abiku cosmos. On the other hand, the old woman is outside a multiplicity of socialities and perceptions. She is located outside the supposedly legitimate social values, she transcends time and emerges as the one who is juxtaposed with colonial history and seeks to rewrite it. Her nature and personal history is identified as:

The old woman had been exiled from society because she looked frightening. A strange disease had deformed her, humped her back, twisted her legs, made her voice ghostly, made her legs swell, and made her complexion more radiant. She was driven from society, isolated, avoided. Nobody would do business with her. Landlords refused to rent her rooms. And so she came to the forest and built her hut and watched the changes in society. She lived the life of a hermit, of a herbalist and benign witch. (102)

Possible within non-linear and anti-realist narratives, the old woman is endowed with powers of transmutation. This is the abiku element in her personage since through her powers of transmutation she can exist in a multiplicity of realities; the mundane, the spiritual and the interspaces. She displays such forms of existence:

That night the old woman went to the moon as a flying spark of light. She circled the moon three times before attending the meeting of other lights from all over the world. In the morning, when she returned full of the energies and

enlightenment her journey had given her--the life extension and the weight of future sight--she resumed the weaving of our narrative. (120)

This is a magical realist plane of perception where reality has possibilities beyond the mundane horizons. However, Okri deliberately proffers the complex personality of the old woman in order to capture specific experiences within the perspective of history and womanhood. Through this technique of presenting magical realities, Okri negotiates for the re-entry of the old woman into history and social values, and demystifies the rejectionist attitude, rooted in mythology, towards womanhood.

Myths constructed via patriarchy identify old age in women as a negative attribute, one that conjures evil. Okri contests this when he re-socialises his textual old woman into creative roles in the society. For instance, the old woman, through her heightened vision, comes severally to heal both Dad and Azaro thus facilitating the regenerative abiku element in their personalities. She is the herbalist featured here:

The herbalist who had been a witch sweated and performed, conjured and contorted, she changed her guises under the cover of shadows, she fought heroic battles with the spirits we couldn't see, and she fought them with her frail form, her face crushed and wrinkled like the skin of the aged tortoise which she put on the bed to help her travel faster through those realms where speed is an eternal paradox. (The Famished Road 404)

The old woman is reclaiming her legitimacy in society by carrying out a role that establishes her relevance. This becomes Okri's device of repudiating myths of malevolence associated with women in their old age. The old woman is restoring her individuality and at the same time symbolises the falsity and rejection of stereotypes in which old women are synonymous with evil. She is imbued with the strength that

transforms her into a focal point around which women rally in their agitation for change.

In this respect, the old woman would recall Mum and the heroism of her political stance but there is an aesthetic discrepancy in their approaches. "They understood the language of trees and butterflies. It was said that an old woman was their leader" (Songs of Enchantment 79). Mum is encompassed in the worldview of the old woman and in fact appears to have gained her elevated consciousness from the old woman. She is among the women who gravitate toward the old woman as the ultimate creator in the power of women to transform reality and as the women's vanguard in a world of evil and oppression. "Many hours later, rising out of myself, I circled the air and saw a silver form floating over Mum. It was the old woman of the forest" (Infinite Riches 210).

It is because the old woman shares the same social vision with people like Dad and Mum that she plays a critical role in the continuities in their lives. Okri creates the old woman as an exemplar of the justice that underpins Dad's and Mum's actions and thoughts. The novelist does not therefore just rewrite old age as a category of the womanhood dichotomy; he also imbues the category with social vision.

This would explain why the old woman and Madame Koto are parallel and irreconcilable personalities, especially when Madame Koto is still in her phallic form and personifies the unjust social traits of patriarchy and a generally perverted sociality. Often, when Madame Koto, like the blind old man, engulfs the society in a spell of oppressive evil influences, it is the old woman who steps in to alleviate the

suffering of society. She is thus illustrative of a moral statement that announces a higher form of reality and a station of power as the protective essence of society. "Madame Koto returned to our area with a fanfare of bells, kettledrums and praise-singers. On the day she returned an angel flew over our street to redeem our suffering in advance" (*Infinite Riches* 175). In other situations, the old woman is a bird guaranteeing the survival of the community. "The owl flew past, its eyes glittering with alarm, the eyes of a watchful old woman" (*Songs of Enchantment* 87).

Okri has departed from the common practice of vilifying womanhood in old age by creating a character who is the underlying force of social images that permeate the drama of humans. Using such vision and social authority, the old woman can reintroduce herself into history, which elevates her womanhood, and continue reclaiming the relevance of women in the writing of history. She is not just watchful over the struggles of her womenfolk and justice as the highest goal of society, she watches over the nation's history that colonial forces have attempted to distort and offers her own corrective revision of the same. This is a dialectical position that portrays her as the depository of the authentic African history and cultural expression, and as a site resisting the deconstruction of prototype Africanity. Consider the Governor-General's version of African history as opposed to the old woman's assertion:

The Governor-General, in his rewriting of our history, deprived us of language, of poetry, of stories, of architecture, of civic laws, of social organisation, of art, science, mathematics, sculpture, abstract conception, and philosophy. He deprived us of history, of civilization and, unintentionally, deprived us of humanity too. Unwittingly, he effaced us from creation. And

then, somewhat startled at where his rigorous logic had led him, he performed the dexterous feat of investing us with life the moment his ancestors set eyes on us as we slept through the great roll of historical time. (*Infinite Riches* 127)

The old woman, whose retentive powers are part of the vindication of the positivised role of women in history that Okri envisages, counters this Eurocentric erasure of African history. The writer portrays the old woman as the custodian of Africanity and its attendant traditions hence giving women a central position in the writing of African history. More importantly, the woman does not just project the place of womanhood in African history but also gives an account that resists Eurocentric narcissism. Her narration of African history, as its most enduring and authentic depository, is in the same perspective with Mum's effort of creating a new political reality through the collective struggle of women. She is diametrically opposed to the Governor-General's version of African history:

...the old woman in the forest pressed on with the weaving of our true secret history, a history that was frightening and wondrous, bloody and comic, labyrinthine, circular, always turning, always surprising, with events becoming signs, and signs becoming reality.... She even coded fragments of the great jigsaw that the creator spread all over the diverse peoples of the earth, hinting that no one race or people can have the complete picture or monopoly of the ultimate possibilities of the human genius alone. With her magic she suggested that it's only when all peoples meet and know and love one another that we begin to get an inkling of this awesome picture, or jigsaw, or majestic power. (128)

From an advocate of African history, values and traditions the old woman progresses toward a universal culture whose creed transcends nationalities and histories.

Eventually, Okri attains the resolution and articulation of re-modelled masculinity and femininity. Male characters, whom Dad largely embodies, do not only accept reversed positions in their sociality but also seek to enhance efforts of women towards an elevated recast. Dad has redefined his domestic role in correspondence with the evolving reality. But this does not make him erase his humanity since it is also the point at which his aggregate social statement encapsulates justice. On their part, women have affirmed their capacity to exist differently both in the home and the public domain. Okri's critical women--Mum, Madame Koto and the old woman--are similar in their goals but their methods are differentiated. If Okri wanted to reinscribe womanhood into culture and political national histories through Mum and the old woman, then Madame Koto is representative of women's economic potentialities and how they can transform society. Each of them is however aware that "Neither was I sure if I was simply wandering in the vast living corridors that lead beyond the famished road to new beginnings" (307).

CONCLUSION

The layout of the trilogy is deliberately developmental in its thematic projections and character presentation. Seemingly, Okri is aware that every point that takes the trilogy forward is a critical component that must be effectively embedded in the ultimate organic whole. The correspondence in thematic growth, especially in delineating gender relations, has the precision and acuity meant to deliver a logical statement. It is a process that explores realities of estrangement and the nature of both restoration and reconstitution.

Thematic views are initially polarised, the womanhood trope versus patriarchal relations, and in the course of the clash an awareness emanates that compellingly intimates a focal point--rewriting gender. Similarly, the characters in the trilogy are encapsulated within a visionary path of progress that gives them a political strength and moral achievement that contrasts distinctly with either their original marginality or oppressive tendencies.

This study has shown that Okri moulds his men and women against the backdrop of social issues like marriage, motherhood, violence and the woman's struggle for social emancipation. These issues imply gender relations since the prescribed roles revolve around the essence of being either male or female.

In The Famished Road Okri embodies the vagaries of struggle and survivalism. Here suffering is a literal and a metaphorically represented idea. As the society surges forward at the penultimate moment of colonial domination, violence and orgiastic destructiveness suck everybody into a moral wasteland. Dad's fights accentuate the

portrait of a suffering society, his own image recalling a person on a mission of redemption. The imagery of the road is itself explicitly a personification of the moral wasteland idiom.

The predicament of the womenfolk equally echoes this famished sociality as they strive to apprehend their nominal humanity. At this juncture the rapprochement between the genders evolves in keeping with stereotypes of enslavement to oppressive tropes. The majority of women at this famished point of the trilogy symbolise exploitative domesticity and general lack of autonomous selfhood. Women like Mum suffer the predicaments of child bearing and nurturing both the child, Azaro, and the father, Dad.

This study has further demonstrated that patriarchy is a component of gender issues that inform the novelist's portrayal of men and women in their social positions. Largely, social institutions and attitudes are still conservative in their repertoire and this can only translate into deprivation in the way in which women witness the appropriation of gender roles. Men are portrayed as domineering and violent in marriage and other avenues of social expression. They exploit the physical bodies of women and confine them in economically dependent positions. Hence the disproportionate role of Dad in public life as compared to Mum's depressing domesticity.

Okri does not however identify the famished political and social aspects with disillusionment. This study has established that Okri is interested in new constructs in the way the genders relate. The abiku symbol is inherently an embodiment of renewal

and its prominence in the aesthetic dimension of the trilogy highlights this message. The novelist has demonstrated the legitimacy of new roles for men and women that would reconcile the polarities in their relations. He has inclined towards a domestic arrangement where women and men can reverse responsibilities and further envisaged a conscientised and assertive image for women in public life. Okri has projected womanhood in a state of heightened consciousness and shaped patriarchal thinking into the acceptance of humane and equitable gender relations. The novelist has advanced a woman like Mum from the marginality of oppressive domestic roles and placed her on a social pedestal that allows her to incarnate dominant socio-political realities.

Songs of Enchantment is part of this resilience and restorative process. As the title suggests, the object of the novelist here is to expose the hitherto famished humanity to enchanting possibilities in their existence. Okri is articulating the need to transform the evaluation of history as a debilitating and preordained continuum into an interpretation of history as having capacities for change. The enchanting voices that the writer represents as white antelopes are imbued with a sense of affirming the alternative to the famished state of being. Noticeably, these are women who alienate themselves from the larger society in order to forge a new reality. The alienated position of the women is therefore a protest position, a way of resisting their traditional status of being inscribed within the patriarchal domain but as an inessential entity.

This is not a militant posture yet it is critical in elevating the self-appraisal of the womenfolk as they struggle for the subject position. Eventually, the “forest voices”

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and their detachment from society gain the symbolic meaning of retreating into creativity to change the stultifying configuration of society. It is a departure from the famished road, a beginning that must culminate into a transformation or reversal of hierarchies.

Infinite Riches climaxes the continuities that have spread from the famished reality to a now rich certainty, a resolution driven by all cathartic elements of tragic drama. Here history and sociality are rewritten to give objects the identity of subjects and universalise creeds of justice and equality. In their struggle for the inauguration of a humane tradition and the reinstatement of their individuality, women witness triumphs of a fundamental nature. Dad recognizes Mum's achievement in history and acknowledges her heroic status. Madame Koto is a messenger who relays the yearnings of both men and women beyond the mundane universe. On her part, the old woman embodies the immutability of African history.

Importantly, though, the empowerment credo of the women is not an insular one. Men do not view the elevated status of women as a contradiction of their patriarchal privileges. They join women in celebrating their acquired consciousness as a pointer to ameliorated gender relations. Dad exemplifies this when he accepts a domestic role.

The women are not solely motivated by the commitment to their emancipation. Their overriding vision is to institutionalise an all-embracing system of values, a transcendental reality that negates sexist dichotomies. It is a moment of infinite riches that gives room for the consummation of all sensibilities in society. Okri is therefore

not just deliberate in depositing this progressive quality in the ideas of the trilogy but is also aware that the end has to be definite, clear and in alignment with the politics of reinventing textual positions to give gender a reworked platform.

The novelist's thesis is to illuminate how the transformation of women's experience from the paucity of marginality to the ululation of centrality captures the larger canvas of reconstructing history by imbuing it with a universal ethos. Against the background of assertive women, Infinite Riches drives toward this acceptance. But it is a gradual process that must begin with positive displacement in social roles before women incarnate the pulse of historical forces.

This study could however not encompass all research possibilities that the trilogy invites. The study was focused on the exemplification of gender relations and hence could not embrace other equally relevant literary concerns. For instance, this study has not sufficiently engaged Okri's style since this was basically a thematic inquiry. The social vision and ideology of Okri as a utilitarian artist also deserves in-depth scholarly interest. Studying Okri alongside other African and Latin American writers could also be meaningful in resolving the question of his penchant for intertextuality. These and other issues like studying Okri in the context of diaspora literary politics are areas that validate continued scholarly interest in the novelist.

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