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# THE AFRICAN WOMEN'S POWERS PROMOTION IN MALE DOMINATED SOCIETIES IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *THINGS FALL APART*, NGUGI WA THIONG'O'S *PETALS OF BLOOD* AND PETER ABRAHAM'S *A WREATH FOR UDOMO*

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## Abstract

The present paper examines the African women's powers promotion system as described in three inspiring novels by male writers. It highlights the real positions of women in African societies far from their common degrading roles wrongly assigned in some male writings. This is done through a critical analysis of the novels, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Petals of Blood* (1986) and *A Wreath for Udomo*<sup>31</sup> (1956), all classics. In these novels, women are portrayed in some ways, so that self-aware of their powers, knowledgeable persons, skilled and spiritually ordained to have their words reckoned in their community with no haughtiness. Based on the natural powers of women in African societies depicted in the novels, the paper tries to demonstrate the pivotal roles of women, by the help of theories like postcolonial, feminism and psychoanalysis, contrary to the general lens women have been heard, seen and perceived.

**Keywords:** Women, powers, education, domination, empowerment.

## Résumé

Le présent essai examine le système de promotion des pouvoirs des femmes africaines tel que décrit dans trois romans inspirants d'écrivains masculins. Il met aussi en lumière le statut réel des femmes dans les sociétés africaines loin de leurs rôles dégradants communs assignés à tort dans certains récits masculins. Cette analyse critique des romans classiques, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Petals of Blood* (1986) et *A Wreath for Udomo* (1956). Ces différents romans représentent des femmes conscientes de leurs pouvoirs, compétentes et spirituellement enjouées pour que leurs paroles soient prises en compte dans leur communauté sans arrogance. Basé sur les pouvoirs naturels des femmes dans les sociétés africaines, l'essai tente de démontrer ces rôles fondamentaux des femmes, grâce aux théories comme le féminisme postcolonial et la psychanalyse, contrairement à l'objectif général que les femmes ont été entendues, vues et perçues.

**Mots-clés:** Femmes, pouvoirs, éducation, domination, autonomisation.

## Introduction

Building great civilizations requires to ensure the welfare of all the components in the societies. African societies have reached that magnitude with the help of women of all kind, intelligent and prominent from the pharaonic dynasties to big empires and kingdoms. All this achievement is supposed to be preserved for new generations. However, awkwardly, European colonization had set its will to destroy the remaining in

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<sup>31</sup> Subsequent quotes are from new editions, with page numbers parenthetically included in the essay and preceded by TFA or POB or AWFU.

other to civilize 'the savage people'. This act of civilization insidiously rubbed out the crucial contribution of women in the making, the leading and the stability of African societies. To the rescue, some selected African writers acting as 'teachers' set in their fiction the foundation of the narrative in favor to African women's powers promotion. The due restoration of African women's powers is also to attest that the female institution is an entity as respected as the male one and that relegating women to an inferior position is to relegate men in some way.

As women are engaged in political, social and economic spheres, questions like how can all this economic, political, social and moral structure be timely built without African women's open-mentality and how come some men are called women without having female genitals can be asked. For example, during a meeting in Umofia, the narrator says that "this meeting is for men" (TFA: 19) which means that the man has no title, that is why he is called indirectly a woman by Okonkwo. The protagonist's father, Unoka, is also assimilated as being a woman and a disappointing failure to his family and the community. Unoka is not courageous and does not bear the presence of blood and fight. The narrator reveals that: "He was in fact a coward and could not bear the sight of a blood" (TFA: 2). Yet, it is a wrong perception to think that unsatisfactory experiences of men should be compared with women's decision of asserting themselves. In fact, the economic life in Africa revolves around women's pro-activeness and determination to have their say in the community. They refuse to subdue to the financial domination of men and to poverty, hunger and resentment. The narrator describes their intimacy in work as follows: "Wanja and the other women on the ridge had formed what they called Ndemi-Nyakinyua group to cultivate and weed the land and earth the crops, working in common, on another's fields in turn. Munira and Karega were busy teaching..." (POB: 200). Women in such communities work together since their forefathers' time and nothing has changed that delighted sisterhood to nowadays. In this quest for answers, we use some passages from these novels to illustrate the soft submission of the individual to the group to let it function normally and equally the way it is necessary to cope with women in some struggles.

As a matter of fact, the reading of TFA reveals that Igbos do not discriminate against women and the present classics, whether anti-feminist or not depend on the readers' own perspective. Meanwhile, many passages in the novels highlight the moment male characters lose their power. They are disempowered to favor that of women. For example, Igbos worship many goddesses and pay tribute to priestesses, a conception which balances both sexes in the society. When a daughter of Umuofia is killed by a villager from Mbaino, as penalty for the crime, the village of Mbaino is asked to offer a young man and a virgin to Umuofia for compensation. This shows the equality about both sexes. In AWFA, Selina acts like hundred men put together and is confident than Udomo.

Much of the misinterpretations about women's body, conduct and position in societies have been fueled by disinformation, misogyny, fear of some men to lose their control over women or the environment where women's *prise de parole* is mocked for entertainment. Women can speak about themselves to address the issue as literature give

them this opportunity. Far from being pessimistic, the question of Spivak (1988): “Can the Subaltern speak?” finds naturally its answer in these three classics by renowned African writers. Finally, the present essay examining through the postcolonial feminism and psychoanalysis lens female characters who have made some marvelous deeds possible is an act of justice to female gender and to human kind. What are the real powers of women in societies? How do they manifest? Throughout the responses, we carry out the powers of African women pertaining to the novels in study.

### I. African Women’s Soft Powers in Male Dominated Societies

Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (2016: p. 1202) defines power as “the ability to control people, things or events. Ability to act or produce an effect”. Power expresses possession of control, authority, and influence over others. Most of the time, when talking of power in sociology, we associate it with masculinity rather than femininity. If power is related to decision-making, then it infers the determination of the person entitled to make that decision and those surrounding him or her. But no human or animal organization can survive and achieve its natural objectives without the expression of power. Where there is power, there is interest and the possibility of conflict. That is why there is obviously conflicts between men and women in the community. In *Things Fall Apart* for example, Okonkwo is described as a villain and a malicious man who terrorizes his wives to prove his manliness and power, so that “his wives, especially the youngest, lived in permanent fear of his fiery temper” (TFA: 23). However, opposed to that male fiery is the soft power Ojiugo, the punished woman, has. By beating her in the Week of Peace, Okonkwo offends the goddess of earth, the one to sanctify the community’s crops. As matter of fact, she imposes on the villain a heavy fine to pay. Ezeani rebukes Okonkwo this way:

Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors. Okonkwo tried to explain to him what his wife had done, but Ezeani seemed to pay no attention. He held a short staff in his hand which he brought down on the floor to emphasize his points. Listen to me, “he said when Okonkwo had spoken.” You are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our forefathers ordained the week of peace. That before we plant any crop in the earth we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor (TFA: 24).

The excerpt shows the influence the goddess representative’s presence has on men and particularly one of the respected one, Okonkwo, to be so accusing. The accusation comes a spiritual woman and the decision is to be esteemed. Moreover, as power is an intangible element, it is not permanent until it declines. When the power source dries, its existence vanishes. Power is also a complex element. This involves strategies to keep it afresh and anew. A powerful leader needs to use his power to help the community. The leader needs to understand that power comes from the portion of power each member of his community offers him to exercise. Consequently, talking of women’s soft powers refer to the condition in which the dominant exercises his or her influence and the conditions in which the supposed subordinate accepts his or her condition without

complaining and without seeking to shift it. Johnstone (2008: 24) states then that: “struggles over power and control are struggles over whose words get used and do not and over whom get to speak and who does not”. In male dominated societies, women’s silence may not be understood as weakness, but a question of power. Silence here does not mean an acceptance of subordination and submissiveness, yet it is an expression of communication. Non-verbal modes of communication is deep rooted in spiritual world and the African women most of the time deploy that sort of communication when initiated.

In some traditional world, some women are often head of covens giving orders to men. They have been educated to keep silence and to be still over any event. For example, in the former kingdom of Danhomey in West Africa (present-day Benin), ‘the Mino’, women ranked above some men (also called Agojie), were entitled to defend the king no matter what happens. They learnt how to separate themselves from pain and never fear the ultimate sacrifice to save the king. The idea of women being the weaker sex does not match here. They were assigned the roles which were traditionally men’s and they did them well. Their existence questions the fact that women are not strong, athletic, skillful, dynamic and audacious. It was really something that was seriously not typical. The Agojies’ fighting motto was ‘conquer or die’<sup>32</sup>. The king picked some of his concubines from the group, however this cannot be revealed to the community as it was supposed not to happen.

Furthermore, according to the novelist Bessie Head in *A Question of Power* (1973), where there is power, there is insanity and it is necessary to heal the male power and cut its irrationality short. In the same vein, to the Zimbabwean activist, novelist and filmmaker Tsitsi Dangarembga, the author of *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *The Mournable Body* (2018), power infers masculinity and masculinity implies patriarchy, racism and exploitative global economic system and female power is the antagonistic one. It means, for the playwright “freedom to choose what you want to do, how you want to act”. It is then wrong to think that success and fame only come after violence and physical battle. Women win most of their battles very softly.

There is no nation without education and no education without determined and motivated people to get it. Therefore, education is an essential tool to the development of any nation. Emerging and developed countries are at that level of development thanks to educated men and women in their different nation. That is the reason why the narrator in *Petals of the Blood* announces solemnly that: “without good teachers there is no nation. Teachers are the true men of the people” (POB: 177). Mandela’s philosophy on education also corroborates that: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world” (Mandela: 1995). Before Mandela, Nyerere (1976) argues that “liberation should be directed to the mind and the body of an individual”. It stirs inquisitiveness and mind development, two features that a nation needs to move from darkness to illumination. Education illuminates its receiver and places him or her above

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<sup>32</sup> The legend of the Mino (our mothers in Fongbé) began to grow during the battle at Savi in 1727. The women showed their impressive skills which helped the Fon people gain a victory over their opponents. Their presence increased the size and the intimidation factor of the kings Army.

ignorance. For Said (1996: 11), “there has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals. Intellectuals have been the fathers and mothers of movements, and of course sons and daughters, even nephews and nieces”.

Here the question of education yielding intellectuals does not only refer to modern one. It is also about traditional education taught in houses, covens and public assemblies by seasoned people. Let’s not shake aside the fact that a mother’s own education and knowledge impact the future of the generation she brings up. Women in *Things Fall Apart* are traditionally assigned the role of children’s educators. What if the educators are not educated? Women transmit what they naturally receive. Through stories, epics, ethics of socializing, and children sitting around to hear after evenings’ meal in moon light or around firewood flames are ways of traditional transmission of education. The audience is disciplined as hearings are conducted with discipline and witnesses are appealed to when there is need for it. Some people think that women’s stories are different from men’s and that women’s may certainly revolve around foolish brave or docile women, lake goddesses or female forest spirits. Here is a passage about that assumption:

He now knew that they were for foolish women and children, and he knew that his father wanted him to be a man.... So, Nwoye and Ikefemuna would listen to Okonkwo’s stories about tribal wars or how, years ago, he had stalked his victim overpowered him and obtained his first human head. (TFA: 51)

In patriarchal societies, while men discuss about war, violence, destruction, crime, battle, women talk about peace, successful marriage, docile children’s reward, farming, tending animals, nurturing children, cooking food and dance festivals. This kind of education collides with that of men replete with allusion to violence, bloodshed and death. Women in assemblies bring about peace with their soft powers. Besides, the powers derive from women’s capacity for child bearing. One of the key and natural duty of women is becoming pregnant. Reaching maturity, women’s body becomes anatomically structured and physiologically organized to receive an egg to be conducted to one or many small human beings. This period of transformation cannot totally be explained. A liquid (the sperm) comes across an egg (an ovule) and both become a baby to grow up to adult. It has something to do with God according to the Igbo and all over the African continent. This is the most essential role of women which men cannot take from them. The narrator portrays the child bearing moment as “a woman’s crowning glory” (TFA: 61). Bearing baby in womb for nine months is one of the women’s soft powers and once it is out of their womb, it is in contact with their blood through the milk for about two years. In the Bible, God’s instruction to Adam and Eve was (Gen. 1: 27): “to be fruitful and multiply”. He gives women the sole ability to reach that noble position. Women are the first to notice the baby moving in their womb, crawling, rocking and walking on his feet, still they clean and cook food for the household. This is totally unimaginable how strong they are to bear all this in the day and in the night still ready to care for their husband sexual desire. If women are left alone to take care of their children like the case of Amaka in Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough* (1981), they have no choice but to become the primary bread-winners and primary care-givers.

If child birth brings joy, then the source of joy is not only the final result (the baby), but also the living vacuum (the mother) that brings forth the joy. Men need therefore women to reproduce and let the human species accomplish the magic of their regeneration and renewal. This is why procreation is highly valuable in Africa and infertility is as feared as the plague. In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood* (1979), the protagonist, Nnu-Ego, craves for a child as if it were the only function of a woman on earth. Nnu-Ego dies lonely with no child around.

Apart from the reproductive function intimately devoted to women, it is commonly known that African women, from the cradle to the grave, are extremely religious. Women play different religious roles in their households. They can take the role physically or intangibly. They can be considered as Parrinder (1976: 100) qualifies as "sacred specialists". Seeking soft and invisible powers to dominate or protect their households, some women adhere to spiritual societies such as witchcraft. According to Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2018), witchcraft is "the capacity to use magic powers" and the Encyclopedia of Religions (2019) clarifies the concept by dividing it into two words: witch and craft. Then, the noun "wicca" means "sorcerer" and the verb wiccian means "to cast a spell". Though it has existed and feared in all human societies, witchcraft still prevails in some societies. As for Agbanusi (2016: 2):

A wizard, on the other hand, is a man who is believed to have magic powers, especially to do evil things. In other words, witches and wizards carry out the same operation of witchcraft, differing only in gender. Thus in Igboland, we often hear people make reference to 'amoosu nwanyi' (witch) and 'amoosu nwoke' (wizard). 'Amoosu' is the Igbo word from witchcraft, and also for a person who practices witchcraft. In the West African belief system, witchcraft is believed to take place mainly at night.

Thus, in that kind of secret society, things are not intelligible because they exist. But the devotees have the power to make them physical and concrete. This soft power of women in some African societies is revered because of the magnitude of its fury on their victims' health and life. It is seen as highly imprudent to contradict in real life the depositories of that power. When the first time, the brave and limitless Okonkwo inadvertently confronts Chielo, the priestess who assists the clan in making decisions, he does not dare to repeat his mistake. She rebukes him and orders him to give her Ezinma. The censure displays the energy that a priestess possesses in Igbo society a spiritual power to respect. As being the intermediary between human beings and gods, her approval towards an evil spirit to harm a human being is quite possible. Chielo utters angrily this to Okonkwo: "Beware Okonkwo! Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speak?" (TFA: 80). It is difficult to understand the reason why a god of that power chooses a woman as his priestess. This attests the balanced chance that nature gives women. The ability of a woman to play a role of priestess reveals the clear degree for women being present and active in male dominated societies.

The foregoing is the expression of the soft power that women have in African societies which lifts them to an unchallenged position. That soft power is revered because of its extent and the collective consciousness in which it evolves. It constitutes a form of social order that safeguards the legatee and exposes the potential challenger to

victim. As the say goes that using one's brain is stronger than using muscle and physical strength, the soft power is better than the physical. The power uses the living and the dead as the features for its existence. The narrator confirms that:

Land of the living was not far removed from the domain of the ancestors. There was coming and going between them, especially at the festivals and also when an old man died, because an old man was very close to the ancestors. A man's life from birth to death was a series of transition rites which brought him nearer and nearer to his ancestors (TFA: 97).

Moreover, when men seek protection, they move to their mother's clan, despite the fact that children belong to their father's. For example, when Okonkwo is exiled from Umuofia, he moves to his mother's village Mbanta to mourn his defeat. Uchendu reprimands that:

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that mother is supreme (TFA: 134).

From the excerpt above, we can see that women are viewed the peaceful foundation of the society, the one man can rely on in case of apprehensions. Mothers and mothers' clan can give holistic cares to psychologically broken men and to grown-up children in needy times. Okonkwo recognizes himself: "My mother's people have been good to me and I must show my gratitude" (TFA: 117). Women are or seem to be givers of final decisions. They are 'Nneka' which means 'mother is supreme' in Igbo language. Without women taking men's military position at war side by side with men, women staying at home to give cares to children, to nurture babies, to watch over patients, to protect spiritually the community during farming periods and take part in the perpetuation of ancestors' legacy, men could not do all this alone. As the say goes: "Behind successful men, stand great women". Men cannot claim to have all the powers of the society, but just a parcel of the powers. They have to accept side by side with their partners to share them. Consequently, if all this is possible, who portray the continent as a misogynistic galaxy full of women bashing characters?

Putting aside soft and holistic powers in the societies, women are also ready for hard works from dawn to dusk. The following lines give clue of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's female characters' hard-working degree.

## **2. Women as Hard Workers and Producers**

Universally, African women are taught to be feminine and hardworking beings. As food and food security are the backbone of a household, women taking the role of good farmers is just a natural incentive. This view is supported by Boserup who argues that "In Africa, particularly, where there exists a prevalence of subsistence agriculture, food production is majorly carried out by women, with little contribution from men" (Boserup, 1980, 10). However, taking aside being farmers, women can find other palliative activities as their societies do not allow them to move from the margin as voice has been given to them. The term voice is to be taken the way Genette analyzes it in

*Narrative Discourse* (1983: 1). Acholonu opines women are “Trapped in the claws of the taboos and the restrictions that only help to propel male chauvinism”. Women in *Petals of Blood* struggle to get rid of their hardship and male stranglehold. Some of them prosper thank to their activism and dynamism, yet other fail because of their approach. In the range of women who fail it make it, we have Nyikinyua. She wants to increase her production and right from the start borrows money from a bank. Yet, banks are not houses of charity.

On the one hand, bank represents two evil forces working against her: the male domination and colonialism. It works as a colonial or postcolonial symbol that deprives Kenyan women’s sole source of happiness. Bank like the colonial system exploits, dehumanizes, marginalizes and devalues the colonized. In that system, the colonized feels inferior to the colonizers. On the other hand, the mortgage is expected to enhance her financial condition and helps her have flowing cash of money after investment. However, it sinks her business and she loses her plot of land as she “signed and the red blotched title, deeds, another piece of paper, they had surrendered to the bank” (POB: 275). The loan disguise like the vampire which sucks innocent blood in the night after having concealed to the man its real cynic nature. There are many Kenyans whose lives are like that of Nyikinyua. If banks’ systems act like the colonial system, then they have to use bayonets and canons to force respect from the colonized and it is what happens.

The depiction of Nyikinyua symbolizes the history of the African continent before the Europeans’ arrival, peacefully delighted. However, her encounter with the Whites has resulted in the loss of her fertile lands and her freedom. Thus, getting loans from banks is like accepting to be enslaved or to be detained in an invisible prison. Just like Africa entangled by structural adjustments and suffocating under weighty loans contracted from IMF, World Bank and other international financial institutions, Nyikinyua is snared by her poverty thinking she could get out of it by mortgaging her land for loans. Today, many African countries are doing so with developed countries and China, oblivious of the trick. What happens is corroborated by this African following say: “when the river get into the ocean, it loses its name”.

In fact, her fiasco does not mean that she is unable to undertake and succeed. Nyikinyua is not a lazy woman. She loses her piece of land and wants to fight back the bank with some of her friends, the narrator informs us. She shows her determination for justice and humanism. When it is about to work to Nairobi to meet the politician of their constituency precisely the Member of Parliament, she refuses to sit in Abdulla’s donkey cart and then walks all the way. She gives good example of willpower and unfailing courage. She believes strongly in women’s potentiality and hardworking mind. In the city, she follows her fellow protesters to ask for their immediate release when Abdulla, Munira and Karega have been arrested (POB: 183). She is the only one who refuses to sing and praise the MP, while there is no water hole in the village. The narrator discloses: “Why should we pay to sing? Go back and tell them this: here we need water, not songs. We need food” (POB: 85). By saying all this, some people think she is mentally abnormal: “Those whose land had not yet been taken looked nervously aloof and distant. One or two even disparaging remarks about an old woman not quite

right in the head” (POB: 276). In fact, Nyikinyua, the old, poor, but daring woman, lacks some teaching in finance and moderation in financial management before starting any kind of business and before getting some loans. She is trapped by two furious animals: ignorance and temper, all that the French philosopher and Mathematician, René Descartes, forbids in his *Discourse on Methods* (1637). She dies the same night to join her freedom fighter husband who has died while fighting the white men. This is her last fight against the oppressor of the poor people before she physically retreats to take from Diop’s poem on dead in *Breath* (1997: I): “Those who are dead are not gone forever. They are in the paling shadows”.

Moreover, Ngugi desires through his female characters that African women have to see themselves as human beings who can fail for not having been taught a subject or understood the way it works. It is the mastering of this that can lead them to the change they crave for. Opposed to that sad experience, Wanja’s condition in Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood* illustrates the determination of women to change their own life by working harder and harder. Wanja has been a prostitute in a brothel in the city before returning to Ilmorog. Prostitution does not stand for a filthy job, instead it represents the final passage of Kenyan women’s resistance against double joke: colonialism and patriarchal system. They are twice colonized the way Roopali states it in his “The Twice Colonized: Women in African Literature”. A prostitute is a powerful woman who knows how to subdue men to her desired sexual positions. On one hand, if it represents male system of exploitation, then women turn it to their side by exploiting men’s pockets. When a client sleeps with a prostitute, he pays the amount of money they have agreed on. The strategic position of giving the price of an abstract good (her body) she offers is the power she has on the buyer. If she refuses that amount, the buyer goes unsatisfied or is obliged to add the missing cash. On another hand, being prostitute means to go against traditional law in Kenya and certainly in almost all African countries. This is why Ngugi tries to save Wanja from the colonial capitalist clutches through the Fanonian wish of violence, sole way of the oppressed people’s liberation in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). Fanon (1963: I) argues that:

National liberation, national reawakening, restoration of the nation to the people or Commonwealth, whatever the name used, whatever the latest expression, decolonization is away a violent event... The need for this change exists at raw, repressed, and reckless state in the lives and consciousness of colonized men and women.

According to the French psychiatrist, violence is the positive means that helps attain a purpose of liberation during an anti-colonialism struggle. So, if violence is the basis of the colonizers’ settlement, it has to be used as response to claim the liberty of the colonized. Thus, to change her life, Wanja bides the offer for a while and accepts the deal to face what she calls “the hole” (POB: 77). The deal helps the female character, a former servant, to become financially a person to reckon. The narrator shows it:

She also what – what a stroke of genius – hired a live band composed entirely of women from many Kenyan nationalities, and this brought more customers flocking to see for themselves. Wanja presided over all this: she had money and she was powerful and men and women feared her. They talked about her, they sang about her, and the many people who drove in to eat

roasted goat meat and enjoy music... Her business in New Ilmorog went up, up, up... (POB: 270-271).

The predicament which forces Wanja to leave the city to Ilmorog totally disappears as soon as she becomes famous, principally through the opportunity of job and then her hard work. Her dream becomes true. Yet, other women do not have that opportunity, despite the fact their eagerness to bring their input to the elevation of their community. In Amma Darko's *Faceless*, Ma Tsuru is overwhelmed by her financial difficulties, but no one shows up to help. This forces her to dump her sons on the street and the daughters into prostitution. When situations change, people also change. Subsequently, Wanja starts expanding her business the way it may be. She recruits other women to help just like 'cash madams' do in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981). She empowers other women of her society. The narrator confirms it: "in time, she employed three barmaids, Kamba, Kikuyu, Kalenjin, who seemed to speak the same language with their eyes and fingers and movement" (POB: 269-270). Wanja reframes herself as a unified body with her sisters in need to transform a compact group of empowered women in Ilmorog. They try to reconstruct what it is to be feminine. This is the case of a woman helping others to end their situation of poverty and financial instability. Some women do not know that they can make it the same way as she does, so they think that being women is synonymous with laziness, failure and second-class citizenship. Society has to encourage women to self-discovery and reject self-humiliation.

In the same vein, another woman also stands off for the full progress after Wanja. Her name is Mariam, a former school teacher. She challenges the submissiveness of women in front of her tyrannical husband who takes all her salary and gives her a little portion. Exacerbated by his insensitivity, she beats him one day, takes her child away and fends her way to Limura where she begs for land to weed. In rural settings like Limura, holding a plot of land is like having shares in a big company and landless women have no decisions to make. Such women are not considered as full grown-up able to lead their household in their men's absence. As they make significant daily contribution to the ongoing of their household, it is central to own land for agricultural purpose or a business for economic enhancement. The Women's section of the United Nations reveals in survey that:

Unfortunately, they are also less likely to own land as statistics show that only 20 percent of landowners globally are women. Also if they hope to inherit family property, the law may deprive them of an equal share, or social norms and traditions may simply favour their male relatives" (UN Women: 2016).

The difference between having a land and having not is what to do with it once owned. As a matter of fact, some women have a piece of land, but do not know that it is a pearl. Yet, apart from all this, we can retain that what men do, women can also do and sometimes much better. Women can take part in politics and stand as good communicators. The following lines give us clues on how subalterns push themselves out of the margin to the center with politics and self-devotion.

### 3. Women as Political 'Animals' and Excellent Communicators

If AWFU blatantly revolves around male characters such as Udomo, Mhendi, Lanwood, Mabi and Adebhoy, women can also be much considered as fuel and of great contribution to the African revolution. Like the other African writers, Abrahams believes in women's natural abilities and qualities. That is the reason why he creatively lets loose of their potentials in the present fictional writing and gives to some of them an extreme beauty to attract men. By giving that potentials to his female characters, Abrahams wants also to oppose some common clichés about women usefulness or illiteracy in male discussions, so he makes Tom Lanwood expresses his own view this way: "You know I don't take women seriously but they are useful" (AWFU: 45). Others go further to think that politics is not a fair and safe place for innocent women. This perception of women has thoroughly been reversed and a better pattern restored. In the fiction, male characters with all their natural ordained potentials have been obliged to find help from a woman of character, Selina. She regularly offers them some girls for their nights to ease off particularly Udomo and Mhendi before he is sent to jail. The narrator reveals it without surprise: "she is for your rest. There are no women in prison. Look at her. She is young and beautiful. She's untouched but she has been trained in our ways. She will comfort you in this hour" (AWFU: 162).

Selina is fully illiterate (AWFU: 178), still she possesses the assertiveness and capacity to draw people's attention and how to force men listen to her and take into account her talents. Her leadership is proactive and is in contrast with the others'. She is an influential woman who usually wants her words to be reckoned. She promises to help Udomo create his own political party magazine *Queenstown Post*. The woman appears to be one of the rare female characters to stand against colonialism and exploitation, although she exploits also innocent girls by sending them to men. Added to this ability, her girls serve as pleasure dispensers to men in emotional grief as they do not know what they may encounter once in prison and the length of their stay. Women's sexual proficiency is called upon in that particular time to soothe the heroes' pain. One of the young girls in charge of that special contract is Maria who impeccably corresponds to Mhendi's preferred type of woman as he portrays: "Prepare a home ...and put a sweet simple woman in it" (AFWU: 97). However, the presence of the young Maria with Mhendi illustrates the importance of the political leaders' private life totally contrasting what they display in public. It shows the instable life full of mysteries and contradiction African political leaders have. Mhendi, an activist of Pluralia, having sex with a young virgin attest also that he is not that strong and insensitive man he means to be.

Yet, if there has not been Selina, there would not have those young girls to tame them and their day would be more traumatic. This validates James Brown's (1966) words in one of his song: "This is a man's world. This is a man's world. But it wouldn't be nothing, nothing without a woman or a girl". Men in the hands of Selina are effortlessly manipulated because of her money, her attractive girls and her speech expertise. She becomes so influential within the party that some members fear her being more listened to than Udomo. She gives instructions to the hero that he follows in the

letter: “come to me and I will speak for you with the women of the market” (AWFU: 128). Selina displays many times more than the other female characters do, in the presence of Udomo or not, her skills in communication and public relations. As it starts to be official, Selina opposes to the relationship between Mhendi and Maria on the ground that Maria is a white girl: “One promise only you must give me. It is this. If the thing we dream of comes you will put no white woman over us, you will take no white woman for wife. That is the only promise I ask” (AWFU: 162). Marrying a white woman certainly collides with the interest of Pluralian women waiting to take on a hero. It also means that women do not want another to rule them. This is unacceptable in Pluralians’ ladder of values, a consideration which is quite ambiguous.

Selina is a full-born communicator who plays her role in needy times, but she does not want Udomo and the others to perceive her as an ambivalent, an ambitious and difficult to reason. When the revolution needs people to communicate on their political initiatives all over Pluralia to convince undecided militants, Selina does voluntarily with her money with committed women:

They wandered from village to village, from town to town, talking to the people. They didn’t hold public meetings. They went from house to house and to the people in their homes. The tide turned and resistance stiffened again. “Suddenly, Adebhoy’s laughter filled the room. “I tell you, Tom, Undura turned up at one village after Selina and her women had been there. The people turned on him and he and his chiefs had to run for their lives! After that they were chased from village to village! (AWFU: 199)

Through her surety, Selina symbolizes by herself hundred militants in move. She commits herself financially and intellectually to the party day in, day out. She shows no despair and no physical flinch. She uses her mouth to convince whereas women such as Maria and Jo Furse accept to use their body. Her skill of good organizer is recognized by respectively Adebhoy: “In less than twelve hours Selina had an efficient smuggling organization going” (AWFU: 198) and Mhendi: “Mhendi realised that this was overall organization and no piece of good luck” (AWFU: 210). Like Maria with Mhendi, Lois who lives with Jo Furse accepts to have an affair with Udomo who finds a better job on *The Liberator*, a magazine where he can demonstrate his fluency. Later in their relationship, Jo Furse gets in regular sexual entanglements with Udomo which result in pregnancy (AWFU: 108-109). Both plan a secret abortion, but they are found by Lois who turns Udomo out (AWFU: 117-118).

Abrahams shows throughout the novel the economic dimensions of some women and the power they have to gather people and dictate their wish to them. They also realize that they can do many good deeds together. This understanding of togetherness propels them to high economic magnitudes which allow them to have panoramic view over actions to be performed in their surroundings. As Mohanty (2003: 23) argues: “it is necessary for Third World women to speak for themselves, to rewrite their history and to produce knowledge about themselves”. This is what Abrahams helps Selina to do.

In another register, Jo Furse lives with Lois, but has the hero at her disposal. This means that all the male characters especially those who are supposed to be above the others are in fact weak and subjugated. The narrator show: “Udomo followed Selina

behind the crates” (AWFU: 150). Anytime Selina shows up, Udomo is behind like a commander in second. Udomo always receives directions from her. Like an empty back wagon, he is dragged by the train machine. He has no willpower to decide by his own without consulting the mammy-merchant, because Selina is “One of the biggest and most influential mammy-merchants. Deals in everything. No one knows how rich she is. Deals in cash even when it runs into thousands. Proud and aloof, especially where Europeans are concerned. More since her return from England” (AWFU: 177-178).

The male characters in the novel are all full of little riddles which weaken their personality and prepare them to loss. That uncontrolled sexual desire is part of the causal elements that lead to their defeat. Udomo dies through the knife of his former bodyguard at the highest peak of the political crisis between Selina and Udomo. The narrator shares that last moment of the dead body of the hero:

They hacked at the lifeless body in a mounting frenzy that kept time with the drums. Then, suddenly, the drums stopped. The men fell down in a swoon. Silence possessed the night. And in the silence others came silently and took the two men away. They left only the hacked-up mess of flesh and bone that once housed the life of Michael Udomo. (AWFU: 306)

From the above excerpt, we can notice the acute relevance of events, actions and speeches throughout the novel. Applied to real life, *A Wreath for Udomo* published in the late fifties of Abrahams forecasts the tumultuous lives of African political leaders on the way of their nation construction. Brave, rich, influential and confident women such as Selina do not stand political betrayal from members of the party they help build from their pocket. According to Abrahams, women should not be regarded as second-class citizens and powerless beings, instead societies should reckon their powers and lead them to self-assertion.

## Conclusion

While examining the African women’s powers promotion in the selected classics by three renowned African writers, we have noted that two of the novels were published in precolonial period and the events move towards decolonization one. By this, the three African writers try to show how, in the early days of post-colonialism and decolonization, women have had their position balanced, though occasionally challenged by patriarchal stereotypes. The writers give voice to women in a way and speak to them in another by screening the possibilities they have to snatch their stance the way all these prominent female characters do. The idea of women working together to realize mutual goals and to support one another is the critical foundation on which African postcolonial feminism is established. By portraying Okonkwo mindful to the priestess’s words, Achebe wants to highlight the venerable point in all human beings in front of ordained representatives of the unseen world. By rendering Udomo respectful to Selina’s commands to the letter, Abrahams insists on the role women have to play in society. The role he suggests throughout his creative work is to be daring and conquering and not to be as Killam (2004: 44) says “mere chattels and their principal role is to attend to the needs of their men and to produce children”.

To this extent, women become subaltern or second-class when they do not recognize their natural power or lose it by bargaining. The passive victims' attitude of Lois and Jo Furse leads them to body concessions to a phallus system which does not even fulfil its promises. Lois and Jo Furse are not prostitute, therefore their body conceding as a reward or as a means of resistance is not their attribution. More surprisingly, it is the position of Jo Furse who leaves with Lois and owes her accommodation to her friend, but falls in the trap. Unlike Wanja in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* who exchanges sexual services for money, Jo Furse seems to do this with no accurate aim of resistance or revenge, but ignorance and stupidity. Abrahams puts these female characters closer to Udomo for his sexual lust. Yet, they fail because they do not resist the possession of their body. In search for men's protection and love, they put down their natural guard and are not successful. As a matter of fact, they fail, not because they are victims of male violence, but their mind of subaltern resurfaces. This is not the case of Ngugi's women who fight the oppressor to the end of their life. They spread love, education, braveness and togetherness all around themselves. Just like Selina, the role shift enables Ngugi's women to contest being locked in their exclusive female roles. It helps women to recognize their full potential and gain confidence to undo their gender roles, but not to become the perpetrator of violence like Selina in AWFU.

Finally, we can notice how the process of becoming a complete woman is that long, hard and challenging to simple women. It gives reason to de Beauvoir's (1997: 295) who states that "One is not born, but rather becomes woman". Therefore, a full woman is considered as the final product of a time-consuming and difficult course which unfortunately has to be fulfilled if a change is needed to improve the African women's life. Women fail in society if they do not dare to start the struggle, fail and restart again and again. Feminism as a practice that addresses women's issues in male societies also fails, if it confines women to their common chores: to be feminine. The three classics represent an ultimate effort to voice and reveal the internal and external knowledge and needs of women in general and the African women in particular. They have challenged the status quo since that time, an effort we should praise.

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