

Gender Power Dynamics: Male Marginalization in the Works of John Nkemngong Nkengasong

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to the general tendency in critical literary circles which, since the rise of feminism and gender studies, has interrogated the female condition under the yoke of patriarchy, this paper examines the extent to which the female gender dominates and marginalizes the male gender (in patriarchal societies) thereby creating the necessity to (re)examine feminine power and the way it operates socially and sexually. Using ideas from Chinweizu (1990) as theoretical positions for the analysis of selected works by the Cameroonian scholar, novelist, playwright and poet, John Nkemngong Nkengasong, this paper investigates the power dynamics amongst female and male gender from two perspectives: the manipulation of male instinct and the exploitation of male inadequacies. It shows that in the selected works of Nkengasong the females control power that formally belong men to the extent that power becomes not just a mechanism for getting what they want but also for making males to feel insignificant, irrelevant, and helpless.

Keywords: Gender, Marginalization, Power, Patriarchy, Sexuality

INTRODUCTION

The general tendency in critical literary circles, since the rise of feminism and gender studies, has been to interrogate the female condition under the yoke of patriarchy (Konate 2006; Hungwe and Hungwe 2010; Sadek 2014). Much of the debate on female marginalization is based on the premise that patriarchy “underscores the disadvantaged positions of women relative to men” (Reckdenwald, 1) and “confines women to the fringes of society” (Gilarek, 2012:221). In African Literature, male dominated literary representation depicted African women in “reductive” manners and often helped in “perpetuating popular myths of female subordination” (Fonchingong, 2006:138). Little or no studies have examined the male condition, not under matriarchy, but under the same patriarchal setup that purportedly gives them power to marginalize the female gender. The argument in this paper uses ideas from Ibekwe Chinweizu (1990) as theoretical positions for the analysis of selected works by the Cameroonian poet, playwright and novelist, John Nkemngong Nkengasong. In his works, Nkengasong seems to concur with Chinweizu’s argument that the theory of male dominance is a feminist propaganda strategy that is accepted by both men and women. Thus, this paper examines the extent to which, in the world of Nkengasong’s texts, women dominate and marginalize the male gender thereby creating the necessity to (re)examine feminine power and

the way it operates socially and sexually. The paper investigates the power dynamics amongst female and male gender in different works to show that “if the essence of power is the ability to get what one wants, then women are far from powerless” (Chinweizu, 1990:11). Rather, they are so powerful that power becomes not just a mechanism for getting what they want but also for making others, particularly men, to feel insignificant, irrelevant and helpless. Although Sara Maia argues that “Under some feminist theories, this [Chinweizu theory] can prove to be one of the macho ways of giving a false sense of freedom and power to women” (2015:391), it is plausible to understand the gender power dynamics and how women control power that formally belongs men.

Feminist literary critics have emphasized the inferior, humiliating, and condescending roles to which women have been subjected in African narratives. As Kate Millet (1969:19) observes “If one takes patriarchal government to be the institution whereby that half of the populace which is female is controlled by that half which is male, the principles of patriarchy appear to be twofold: male shall dominate female...”. The first principle of patriarchy “male shall dominate female” has often been the focus of research with little or no research on the reverse that is – on how women dominate men. In conformity with the first principle and in the light of the African novel, Helen Chukwuma (1990:133) states that

The female character in African fiction is a facile lack-lustre 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 was not part of decision-making both as a daughter, wife and mother even when the decisions affected her directly.

Chukwuma's observation is plausible within the context of earlier African male authored narratives that place the man at the centre of the cultural universe. Contemporary African writing by male authors have witnessed a shift in trajectory as some authors reflect female characters in rebellion while others capture the experience of women in position of power. The works of Nkengasong reflect both situations but the focus of the analyses is on how women who hold some kind of power use it to exploit men. The reader encounters female characters that do not strictly conform to the dictates of cultural wisdom or the expectation of social standard. More often they are female characters who make “The affirmation 'I am'” which as Chukwuma (1990: xv) argues “presupposes that the subject knows what she is”. Although not strictly feminist in tone or style, Nkengasong’s works somewhat “trace[s] the process of this self-knowledge and selfhood” through female characters who break the social and cultural code and go beyond that to make the male folk feel inadequate and to some length helpless and useless. Marginality within the context of this paper, therefore, deals with the dynamics of power and how it is used in the female-male or male-female relationships projected in the works. It is important to clarify that the idea of power refers not necessarily to official, institutionalized or political power, but to any form of relative advantage that one gender has over the other whether assigned by social convention, cultural codes or self-defined, and how that advantage is used in the positionality of the other in this case the male.

Chinweizu’s characterization of both genders somewhat attributes strength, confrontation, aggression, and control to the male, and ascribes to the female such attributes as calmness, passivity, emotional and manipulative. The fact that some of Nkengasong’s female characters exhibit some of the attributes which Chinweizu says are masculine, and that they use these

attributes to marginalize the males confirms Chinweizu's claims that these female characteristics are purposefully used to deceive men, so as to covertly rule or control them. Chinweizu (1990:12) states that "because every man has as boss his wife, or his mother, or some other woman in his life, men may rule the world, but women rule the men who rule the world". The works of Nkengasong are veritable exemplifications of Chinweizu thesis that behind the scenes of institutional power even in highly phallogentric social and cultural systems women wield tremendous amounts of unrecognized power. The story of the rise and sudden fall of Honourable Mbutuku in *The Widow's Might* is told from the surreal world of Akwenoh, the lady who makes her way up the rungs of the social and political ladder by controlling the tides of men's lives from behind the scene. Also, in the household of Mr Senze in *Achakasara*, there is evidence of different female characters controlling the condition of the family and the lives of the male characters. In *Across the Mongolo*, apart from Ngwe's mother in the village who is instrumental in his life, Shirrila his girlfriend at the university is the hub around which his entire being circulates. The demented hero in *Black Cap and Red Feather* is explicit in his pronouncements about the role and influence of Nwi in his life before, during and after his prison experience. *Ancestral Earth* dramatizes an even more elaborate situation where women take control not only of the lives of their individual husbands but also that of the entire society in a bid to stop the excesses of the exercise of political or formal authority by the male folk. Although "female power does not need those elaborate structures of formal authority which have evolved to control the large aggregates of persons required by the specialist activities of the male domain" (Chinweizu, 111), they have power that allows them to control situations from behind the scenes of patriarchy - "the power behind the throne". Akwenoh, Shirrila, Aunti Shuri, Nwi and a host of other female characters in Nkengasong's works are clear examples of women who do not have institutionalized power or formal authority but manipulate their husbands and boyfriends and use them to have access to the political/higher class or obtain their desired goals.

The rise of feminist discourses and questions of gender equality have propagated the allegation that men are responsible for the problems of women. Most critical works on female empowerment, female representation, and gender equality are replete with questions of misuse and distortion of power and privilege. Such studies show that in social context where the control of power and privilege reside with the men, the male folk often exercise such power and privilege at the expense of the female folk. There are, however, some divergent or variant opinions as some critics believe that some women are accomplices and by implication more culpable than the men. These critics find justification in the idea that, by validating the assumption of inferiority of women, some women assist the men to subjugate the female folk. This study examines the dynamics of female power in a society where power and privilege are in the hands of men. It argues that although set in strong patriarchal societies, in Nkengasong's works the female characters exert and exercise different forms of political, social and sexual power in such ways that they end up marginalizing the men. Although it is plausible to argue that the women in these texts are engaged in acts of resistance, it is even more credible to argue that the point where female resistance crosses the line of equality and starts working in the disfavour of the men, it stops being resistance and becomes marginalization.

The epistemic structures of most African cultures are built in ways that socializes the female gender from the early stages of life to know that certain values and norms are acceptable while others which mostly favour males are not to be tampered with. Nkengasong's works seem to

capture the power dynamics within such a context. However, there is a thin layer of female/male power binarism controversy that has remained largely untouched by scholars. This analysis builds on the prototypical analysis offered by scholars (Labang 2008; Ambanasom 2009; Ngongkum 2010; Ambanasom 2013, Teke 2013; Ngeh 2015; and Formukong 2016) who have analyzed various aspects in the continuum of thematic and stylistic issues in the works of Nkengasong. It attempts to understand how the writer engages and inscribes a more complex philosophical code of female agency in his postcolonial creative space by reversing the tides of conventional views in a bid to understand the complexity weaved into the fabric of Nkengasong's works. Could Nkengasong's works be considered one of the "better imaginaries" which according to Chimalum Nwanko (2006:195) is required to contradict the dominant culture that silences African women? By presenting female characters that not only break the social and ethical code, but who use feminine power to marginalize males, Nkengasong advertently or inadvertently reverses the binarism of gender relations.

MANIPULATION OF MALE INSTINCT

The manipulation of male instinct deals with the female character's ability to use sexual and sensual potentials to control the mind-frame, behaviour and decisions of men. Because the issue of power dynamics between men and women is inevitably linked to control, "sex is a status category with political implications" (Millet, 1969:43). Millet defines politics as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (43). Sexual politics focuses on ideas and activities that are concerned with questions of how power is shared between the different sexes, and how it affects the dynamics of the relationships. In Nkengasong's *the Widow's Might*, female sexuality is exposed as a self-defined and assigned source of power that is used in such ways that men become tools used for the gratification of female pleasure and desire. The narrative strategy that Nkengasong adopts places Akwenoh at the centre of the narrative by using her psyche to explore the hideous story of political ascendancy inspired by a woman's spitefulness towards her teacher-husband and his inferior status. Akwenoh is a beautiful woman who uses her sexual and sensual power to pave her way through life. Men flock to her and will even fight to be with her. The men she has sexual dalliances with include, Pa Noucham, Ebbe, and Mr Tebu. Even men who have sworn their lives to vows of celibacy like Father Vaginus are subjected to the spell of Akwenoh. Within the cultural context of the novel, patriarchal thinking will easily consider Akwenoh as a materialistic woman who has no scruples about selling herself for money especially because her relationship with Pa Noucham has no emotional attachment. She wants his money (which he flourishes her with) though she is disgusted with the man because he is ugly and eats cola nut which makes his spittle brown and sticky. Such reasoning is derived from the conventional manner of finding fault with the female in total disregard of the role of the male. Akwenoh might be in quest for Pa Noucham's wealth, but questions begging for answers could include: why does Pa Noucham want with a girl that could be his daughter? What does he benefit from a romantic relationship with her? Can society find fault with Pa Noucham? Akwenoh provides the companionship and the psychological satisfaction of believing that he is still a man against the evidence of his age and appearance. By providing company and psychological satisfaction to a man she detests, Akwenoh is able to manipulate him into spending money on her; she is therefore not necessarily materialistic but is receiving the dividends of the effort she puts into her acts.

Akwenoh creates a love triangle which leads to a fight between Pa Noucham and Ebbi. Pa Noucham is a complete contrast to the man she actually loves. Ebbi, who will do anything for her, tries to encourage her to take education seriously but Akwenoh does not pay attention. She is comforted with the notion that she will get a “MAN” unlike her friends who are struggling to get an “MA”. Akwenoh understands the mechanism of female power and is good at using it to manipulate the men she comes across. Her philosophy of life is different from the conventional philosophy into which Ebbi is struggling to canalize her. She believes that when a woman has a man, her problems are solved since he takes care of all her needs. She is certain that the man is Ebbi, yet she cannot concentrate on him. He is hardworking and intelligent but since he cannot produce ready money at the moment she will supplement with Pa Noucham. Her manipulation of the male gender is made evident in the confrontation between Pa Noucham and Ebbi, as seen in the following:

She soon fell out with Ebbi... could love be so slippery? Could love be so treacherous? It was all her fault. She was not stable with Ebbi. It was all her stupidity to have caused Ebbi to know that she had dealings with Pa Noucham. Ebbi had trailed them to a chicken parlour where they ate roasted chicken and drank wine. Ebbi fell on her and beat her mercilessly. Pa Noucham tried to fight back but Ebbi dealt him several bitter blows that landed him on the floor. It was such a disgraceful scene among Pa Noucham's close friends... Ebbi ordered her to take leave immediately or he was going to strangle her... Noucham later bribed the police to arrest, torture and detain Ebbi on charges that Ebbi was an armed robber who had attacked him that night. (*The Widow's* 75)

The omniscient narrator who co-narrates the story with Akwenoh seems to blame her for the disruption of her relationship with Ebbi “It was all her fault” (75). The question of point of view becomes central here. Who is the omniscient narrator? Who does the reader believe? At this point in her life, will Akwenoh consider that it was her fault? Apparently, the omniscient narrator is a male (or a socialized female) who agrees to the conventional standards of the society. This is because he/she finds fault with Akwenoh for double dating but does not find fault with either of the men. This narrator apportions no blame on Ebbi for battery or assault on Akwenoh because he agrees with the social convention that if one's girlfriend cheats on him, he is justified in beating her up publicly or privately. Considering the events surrounding her at the moment of her husband's death and the tint of heroism with which she presents some of the events, it is hard to think that Akwenoh will accept blame for double dating Noucham and Ebbi. She was not a woman that was meant to be stable, as the narrator purports; because even when she got married to Mbutuku (assumedly a point of stability), she still had several sexual affairs including that with Father Vaginus whom she suspects is the father of one of her children. Akwenoh is presented as a lady with the ability to emotionally and financially exploit different men. Emotionally, she is attached to Ebbi who is young but her financial attachment is to Pa Noucham. Ebbi is physically powerful and Noucham is financially powerful, but Nkengasong skilfully brings both men into the same arena to showcase the power that Akwenoh wields over them. She is the center of romantic/sexual power and the two men are the marginal individuals whose existence are influenced and manipulated by the power that radiates from her center.

Although her educational level and social standing falls short of the demands of her society, Akwenoh capitalizes on her sexual and sensual prowess not only to get the men she desires but also to use them to her advantage. She seduces Mbutuku and marries him, knowing that his

major attraction is the fact that he is a graduate of the Advanced Teacher's Training College and will soon receive huge arrears of salary. Unfortunately, these arrears do not come promptly pushing the newlyweds into abject poverty. There is conflict in the home since Akwenoh completely subverts and disrespects the husband. She is an authority to herself and does as she please. She refuses to help the husband on the farm he tries to cultivate in order to make ends meet. Akwenoh feels justified in cheating on her husband in order to feed the family. One of the men she has an affair with is Mr Tebu, a banker in Limbeli. She abandons her children and visits him often under the pretext of buying fish for her petit trade since Limbeli is a seaport town. Here, the female marginalization of the male gender is made evident by the disdainful manner in which Akwenoh describes Mr Tebu. He is a stingy man who will not give her any decent amount of money though he controls all the money in the bank. This disdain brings to mind her outlook of Pa Noucham. Akwenoh is a woman who knows her strengths and is capable of using them to establish grounds for survival. Men succumb to her charm and she uses them shabbily and never really cares about their feelings as long as they fulfil her needs. The more intriguing aspect is the fact that she has no gratitude for any of them; she thinks that they can actually do better. Although Akwenoh justifies her philandering and extra-marital affairs on a struggle to care of her family, she later regrets her acts because her predicament is caused by her previous wayward behaviour.

Another narrative in which sexual politics comes into play is *Across the Mongolo*. Ngwe the protagonist is enamoured by Shirila whom he loves dearly. She is so beautiful and kind that Ngwe finds it difficult to escape her charms. He sees her as the woman "beneath whose breast his soul is buried". Shirila is a force in Ngwe's life and encourages him not to quit even when things are bleak. Yet, she is also a material girl who hooks up with the Director of the President's Cabinet in order to satisfy her needs. She even confesses to Ngwe thus:

'I cannot refuse that I have nothing to do with that man of recent.' My heart throbbed furtively. 'You and I have been together for long and you have never had cause to suspect me of any double play. I love you dearly and I don't see how that love can be tampered with'... 'please, Ngwe, allow me to say what I want to say,'... 'put yourself in my situation... I am a girl, a big girl. And you know that you have never helped me in terms of my school needs, not to talk of buying me a dress. I cannot blame you for that. I know if you had the means, you would do it. But what has fooled me to this man is the material assistance he gives me. He supplies the things you find around me now, the refrigerator, the fan and the cooker. I have told the man about your position in my heart and that we are planning to get married. I have begged him not to frequent my room. I don't know how to send him away, Ngwe. The man is too insistent. I do not know what to do. (*Across* 181-82)

Shirila's sexual politics is seen in her struggle to straddle the world of genuine love with Ngwe and that of material possessions guaranteed by Monsieur Abeso. Shirila, like Akwenoh, is in love with one man and more interested in the fiscal benefits provided by another. Ngwe knows about this affair and is impotent to make her stop since he cannot provide these needs. Ngwe has nothing but his love to offer which though sincere is insufficient. Shirila wants his love and also the material things that Monsieur Abeso Louis le Vin's money can buy. Ngwe is the marginalized individual whose love is not fully reciprocated. Whenever he sees Monsieur Abeso's black Mercedes car, something dies inside him. He is unconsciously aware that he is fighting Goliath-David battle and in this one, David does not even have a sling.

The anguish Ngwe feels is akin only to the profound love he has for Shirila. This is his first attempt at love and he is really taken. He thinks that it is important to give Shirila “a margin of security” when it comes to dealings with a woman. He cannot do anything without desiring to be with her. He wishes to possess her completely, but Monsieur Abeso is a dark cloud hovering over them. Ngwe is afraid that he will get hurt despite the assurances given to him by his beloved. When he gets a letter from Shirila he feels so elated, and his rhetorical question is prove of this feelings: “what can stop a man from thinking that he is the champion when he reads such passionate and tender words from a sweetheart?” (185).

It is the pain of marginalization that causes Ngwe to act like an idiot. First, he is Anglophone, a marginalized subject in his own country. He is an intelligent young man, yet he has spent six years in the university without earning a degree. By capitulating to Monsieur Abeso is like acknowledging that the Francophone is superior to him in every way. He successfully sabotages the romantic evening that Monsieur Abeso and Shirila plan. He eats the best parts of the chicken and climbs into Shirila’s bed without ceremony. The confident rival is offended and leaves. This is the end of the relationship and also the beginning of more academic problems for Ngwe. His name does not appear on the list when results are published. It is as a result of the rivalry with Monsieur Abeso that this happens. This shows that despite the fact that he loved her genuinely and would have done anything for her, he could not win the war. The dead of his dreams and aspirations come from the marginal position he succumbs to when he falls in love.

Call of Blood dramatizes a horrifying romantic ordeal in which the marginalization of the male through sexual politics results in the death of Manka’s husband and the eventual mental breakdown of Maknka and Efenze, the third partner in the marriage. Manka is the dissatisfied woman who allies with her lover to kill her husband. Her partner in crime is Efenze a friend to her husband whose sole desire is to lay hands on his friend’s enormous wealth. She is very active in the murder and also in the cover up that follows. Their activities make Efenze’s wife to eventually leave her marital home and Manka expects Efenze to live up to his end of the bargain and marry her, but this is not to be. He marries another woman and cuts off Manka from his life. The quest for power is what motivates Efe to kill his friend, while Manka is tempted by the promise that the money she will control at the death of her husband will buy her privilege and prestige. Her husband was hardworking and caring; he provided her with everything she asked for yet she was not satisfied. Maybe because the husband was not as dashing as Efe considering that she keeps lamenting her poor decision after everything backfires and Efe abandons her. When she asks the rhetorical question “what did Manka want in this world of plenty?” One realizes that she had no reason to get rid of her husband.

Efe’s emotional exploitation of Manka is a form of male marginalization of women. Though Manka falls prey to it, when she eventually realizes this, she takes control of the circumstances and seeks not to adjust the wrong but to pay the man in his own coins. She goes to “grimba” and causes Efe’s madness. The charm backfires and affects her as well, she meets with him at the rubbish heap, and they actually unite in a mock wedding. Manka is a metaphor of Shakespeare’s idea of the scorned woman. This is evident in the brash decision she takes. She realizes that she was a fool to kill her husband in the hope that Efe will marry her only after he has swindled her of her money. She does not fold her arms and pine but goes ahead to hurt him. At the end of the day, they both end up demented, none enjoying the ill-gotten gains they murdered for. Manka emerges victorious albeit in a nihilistic way, she is Efe’s life companion on the rubbish heap.

Like the character's in Satre's *No Exit* (2015), they both realize that hell is the other person; they detest and torture each other but cannot leave apart. As Inez puts it, they are "trying to throw dust in each other's eyes" forgetting that both of them are "tarred with the same brush" (*No Exit*, 2015:202). This is evident in the violent quarrels and eventual reconciliation on the rubbish heap. Instead of allowing Efe to use her in achieving his own goals, Manka prefers to be subjected to a similar fate with him on the rubbish heap; to be, in Sartrean terms, a torturer of each other. The encounter on the rubbish heap is an instance of Nkengasong's creative tendency to explore the innate being and psychological trauma of the individual.

Women are at the centre of all male actions and aspirations as seen in *Black Caps and Red Feathers* (2001). Creature is a victim of political brutality and torture, yet amidst this suffering and pain he only thinks about his wife. He affirms that he would have died in the dungeons if not for the memories of his wife and kids. She is the driving force of his life and there are instances in which the demented Creature directs his ranting as a personal address to her. The only time Creature takes concerted action and shows resistance is when his wife and children are threatened. Traourou's berets promise to kill his wife and kids if he does not show them where Oumi is hiding. He does not know this location, but he has to protect his family, so he takes them to the graveyard and pretends to knock on a grave announcing that he has brought the victims. Fear for the safety of his loved ones makes him creative and this sends the berets scattering in all directions while his family is saved.

The love he feels for his wife is overpowering and this shines through even in his dementia. He has lost touch with reality and also because of the strength of his emotions he speaks as though his wife is present. An instance is seen below:

...Our dear little ones ... my dear woman, that was their want if I did not show them Oumi's hiding. But I spared your life and that of the little ones by miracle. By the miracle of ghosts... yes Ngwi, if he comes, we're done with. They will drag me on the stones for miles and have my head churned before they get it to the Alps. And you and the little ones, they'll make splinters of you. What do you say woman?... we must move from here? No. it is not possible. They can't come... that is woman talk, Ngwi, Madwoman's talk. (*Black Caps* 2001:26-27)

The act orchestrated by Creature is a heroic one, this is successful since the berets don't lay hands on his family. He reminisces as though his wife is actually present, and they are involved in a husband-and-wife banter. He feels like his wife is insisting that they move to a new house for the purpose of security while he tries to push her fears away by indicating that no one can harm them anymore.

The female is presented as the centre from where males draw inspiration and to which they are irrevocably connected. The essence of Creature's quest is intricately linked to his romantic engagement and involvement with Nkwi, his wife. She is the bedrock of his existence; and even in his state of dementia she provides a reason for continued existence and elated libidinal sensations which according to Sigmund Freud is the life wire of human existence. The fact that Creature loves his wife dearly and is really besotted to her is seen in the way he describes her: Remember Ngwi, I have never seen any woman born of a woman so enchanting as you are. So ravishing, yet so understanding, so devoted. You are a gift from my god. The tiger's skin, the elephant tusk. In short, the antiquity of the clan so endeared to me. Without you Ngwi, what is

life to me, what is death to me? I fight for honour, so that you can be honoured if I succeed, you'd be the most honoured of ladies in the clan. You'd be the envy of all women. Your name will be sung in history books and students shall read them for times and times without end. I get trapped in the hole for your honour. To convince you that I am a man. You Ngwi are really wonderful (2001:28).

The above quotation illustrates the influence of the love Creature harbours for his wife. He has worked hard in life to make her the honoured lady, one of whom other women will be jealous. He is able to stand up to Traourou's tyranny and brutality; he is able to tell the clan the truth about what happens to Ganje because he wants his wife to be proud of him. He loves her and wants to prove his worthiness by all possible means. Creature attempts to be a hero in his wife's eyes. He does not want her to feel shame because of any of his actions; he will even undergo torture just to have her approval. Creature is intensely linked emotionally to his wife that the mere thought of her lights up a range of emotional reminiscences:

That cold cave without you, Ngwi. All alone. And you come into my mind... I was elated like a charged particle in a magnetic field. I was hot, hot, hot to splitting... I felt the warmth of your breath in my eyes, my ears, and on my entire face. Everywhere. I felt the pulsing of your breasts beating in my heart, the palpitation of your groins... the lushful thighs you used to weap me in and induce me to sleep and conjure heaven... those delicacies you were used to cook for me. My achu... my corn fufu and njama njama... (2001:28-29)

There is the persistence of Creature's deep love for his wife. In the dungeon he is dejected without her but just the memories of the times they spent together lightens the pain he is going through. He actually remembers the way he feels when in her arms. She does not only assuage his sexual hunger but feeds him well too as he remembers the great meals, she used to prepare just for him. Evidently, the manipulation of male instinct is a viable way of controlling male folks. The female characters adopt different methods of sexual politics to control the men in their lives.

MASCULINE INADEQUACIES

In the works of Nkengasong, women are presented as resilient forces that take active steps in seeking solutions to the problems of society. The men in *Ancestral Earth* (2010) respond to the crises in the community in much the same way as Mbutuku in *The Widow's Might* (2006). They all engage in drinking and negligence at a critical point in their lives or the life of the community. While the male folk are engaged in reckless drinking, the females are either taking individual action or mobilising a united front from which they address the issues. The environmental crises affect the wellbeing of the community because of its agricultural nature. The drought is caused by the king's greed for money as he allows foreigners to cut down trees indiscriminately, ruining the ecosystem.

In most contexts, the man is the head of the family even when the woman is the bread winner. It is the duty of the woman to be respectful and subservient to the husband in every instance. However, in the works of Nkengasong the reader encounters female characters who ridicule the male folk because of their inadequacies. In *The Widow's Might*, Akwenoh rises above the traditional philosophy and role dictated to the woman. Because her husband cannot provide her needs, she sees no reason to respect him. In the following confrontations between the

couple, Akwenoh reminds her husband of his inability to cater for the needs of the family and blames him for whatever behaviour she adopts to help her family:

You are a married man... because you spend your nights drinking with friends while your children starve. And you call me a prostitute. Let me not hear it again. Even if I were one it's your poverty that has caused it. Have you ever bought me a dress since I fell into this your latrine called a house? You can't maintain a woman and you want to control her. I will not accept it... you church rat. Don't call me akwara again. Look at yourself. You don't even know how to dress well. The collars of your shirt are all chopped, all your trousers chopped between the legs. I'm often ashamed introducing you to friends as my husband because you look like someone struck by misery. (2006: 65-66)

From this quote, one sees the disrespectful nature of Akwenoh; she intimidates her husband and rubs his poverty in his face. To her, marrying him is synonymous to falling into a latrine, a metaphor that conveys the unbearable condition of destitution in their home. She justifies her prostitution on her husband's poverty and inability to provide her needs. If she is a prostitute, it is not her fault that her husband's. He is a shabby looking man, and she tells him how shameful it is to introduce him to her friends. His trousers are all thorn between the legs as a result of too much wear while his shirts have no collars. His poverty is therefore license for her to go out with other men. This insult to the ego seems to be what propels Mbutuku to exhibit vaulting ambition. She resembles the portrait of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* who derides her husband's weakness and pushes him to commit several murders in order to become King. Mbutuku becomes a parliamentarian through hideous means as an attempt to assert his manliness which his wife has subverted. He will rather be a nihilistic power monger than a pauper whose wife flaunts her affairs in his face.

Another instance of male marginalization is evident in Akwenoh's view of Chief Ekwe and his traditional androgynous ideology especially the belief that she has to become another wife of the chief. Akwenoh dismisses Chief Ekwe's threats and propagation of customs of re-marriage after the death of Mbutuku. She is a woman who knows her mind and will not be held back. She is not intimidated by Chief Ekwe and the demands of tradition. She refuses out-rightly to marry him when she says "as far as marrying you is concerned, I will not accept. (2006: 30-31). In the African context, the woman is often seen as the marginalized entity in the binary equation of man and woman. In most traditions, the woman is regarded as a commodity and a form of cheap labour. Chief Ekwe is a traditionalist and Mbutuku's elder brother, and so considers that Akwenoh is supposed to automatically become his wife now that his brother is dead. He tries to uphold tradition which requires that a man inherits his brother's wife and children after his death. Akwenoh's categorical denial and apparent insolence to the chief who finds himself helpless is a clear indication of the woman's rebellious personality. She does not think Chief Ekwe is in the same class with her, he is a rustic and she will have nothing to do with him.

There is also evidence of the marginalization resulting from the inadequacies of the male in *Achakasara* (2011). However, unlike the situation in *The Widow's Might* wherein Mbutuku's family is thrown into chaos because of his poverty and inability to care for his wife and kids; from the beginning of *Achakasara*, the Senzes are depicted as a caring couple, one that really wants to have kids. Unfortunately, their child dies a few days after birth and they resolve to adopt Acha. This is essentially Madame Senze's idea and the husband goes along with it in order

to keep his wife happy. As a child Acha has warm feelings about his parents but his mother is the more constant person in his life. After her death, things degenerate for Mr. Senze and Acha, Mr. Senze misses his wife and is helpless without her. Acha basically lives on bread and chocolate since he does not know how to cook. Things get really bad after the house help leaves. A major inadequacy which contributes to the degeneration of Mr Senze's household is the inability to control his sexual urges and his erroneous belief that a female house help is easily available to the master. As a man in a phallocentric culture, Mr Senze assumes that the house help would easily and willingly fall for any sexual advances. His continuous unwelcome romantic advances lead to a quarrel between him and the house help, and she leaves despite his pleas. Her parting words give an idea on the man's dependency on the woman thus their marginalization, "I go go. I no be your woman. How you de force me for do thing whe I no want'am? No be na me I kill your woman". The house help refuses Mr. Senze's sexual advances and will not stay in the house because she does not plan to have such a relationship with him. She is aware that he needs female companionship after the death of his wife, but she is adamant when she insists that it is not her duty to provide such. The man in this case is seen as the subaltern. He pleads with the house help to accept him as a sexual partner, but she will not have him. Even when he apologizes and pleads with her to stay on and work for him, she opts to leave. The house help's rejection of Mr Senze's sexual advances and his plea for her to continue working for him is a form of resistance which changes the power dynamics in the home.

Nkengasong uses the concept of the evil stepmother as he captures the misery into which Acha and his father Mr Senze are thrown by Auntie Shuri who uses her psycho-sexual ability to exploit the situation in the family home. Male marginalization exposed when Auntie Shuri comes into the scene and completely takes over the lives of both Mr Senze and his son. From the onset she comes across as a nice and caring woman, but she soon finds ways to make life difficult for Mr. Senze and Acha. The man is clearly impotent in his own house as everything goes according to the dictates of Auntie Shuri. She refuses to feed Acha, and his school career suffers. She informs Acha that he is not Senze's son, and her husband will not waste his money on him. The result is that the child is sent out into the streets and Mr Senze is unable to stop this evil act perpetrated against a child. Some of her bad habits are seen when "Acha observed that she behaved differently towards him, always complaining to his father ... she was very rude to his father, ... and asked him to do all the odd things for her, washing dishes, cleaning the kitchen, sometimes cooking following instructions or washing her inner wears" (2011:48). Auntie Shuri is seen as the domineering force that dictates the pace of life in the household. Acha and Mr Senze have no choice but to dance to her rhythm; both men are in her snare and can do nothing about it. While Acha is obliged to do all the house chores as Shuri lazy about, Mr Senze is subjected to verbal abuse. There is a complete reversal of values since the man is normally the dominant force.

As a result of Shuri's domination, the home for both father and son become estranged and the child's school career comes to a halt. Acha's unhappiness is seen in the following:

Acha sat on his bed in his room and wept. He didn't know how he could convince his father to register him the following year. The influence of Auntie Shuri on his father was too strong that the man could hardly take a decision in his favour. Besides, his father refused to tell him whether he was his father or not. He simply stayed quiet and asked him whether Auntie Shuri asked him to do. (2011:57)

Mr Senze does not register Acha in school in order to avoid the wrath of his wife. Her hold on him is strong and he cannot do anything if she disapproves, the fact that he neglects his son because of this shows that the man is completely at the mercy of the woman in *Achakasara*.

Ancestral Earth (2010) is another of Nkengasong's works which has the prevalence of feminine domination that results in the marginalization of the male folk that appears to be incapable of solving the ecological and environmental crises confronting the community. Although the thematic trajectory of the play is the ecological and environmental crises challenging the earth on a global scale, Nkengasong uses the experience of a village community to accomplish two things: to show how the random exploitation of forest and other forest resources is affecting the common people; and to show how women through collective action override the traditional social order and take centre stage in the quest for solutions to the problems of the society. The society is one in which women dominate and seek solutions to their problems while the men are shown to be impotent and only take solace in drinking themselves to a stupor. There is famine and droughts in the land due to the carelessness of the leader who has sold the forest to white men. Even the King and the authority he symbolizes is undermined by the women who stage a successful revolution against him. No one heeds him even when he rebukes them and asks that they return to their homes.

Alabi is the chief priest accused of using supernatural means to have a sexual relationship with the king's new wife. The punishment is already dictated, he is going to be castrated and then banished, yet the arrival of the women on the scene changes things completely. They stand behind the chief priest and accuse the king of being blinded by the beauty of his young wife. At this point in time, even Afingong who is the favoured wife, the woman who has turned the king into a senile old fool turns against him and sides with the women. This resistance is therefore successful since the king lacks even the support of his beloved wife.

One of the ways through which females circumvent social conventions and succeed to marginalize males is by forming a collective front for opposition and resistance. The marginalization of male is enhanced through collective and concerted action by female. In *The Widow's Might*, the role of sisterhood is highlighted as Akwenoh is a member of the Global Ladies, a group that is composed mainly of the wives of influential women in town. She has a great friend in Emade who is supportive and kind along with Madame Opote, a happy widow, who advise her on how to organize her husband's funeral and keep some of the money for the education of her children. The bond of sisterhood is quite strong not only in the way the women rally around Akwenoh, help organize her husband's funeral but also in the fact that they actually foot the cost of the funeral when the parliamentary group refuses to provide the money. This helps her avoid her troublesome in-laws who would have humiliated her further if she had disclosed her financial destitution to them.

Although the King in *Ancestral Earth* is a reckless tyrant, there is a glaring projection of male marginalization in the fact that the women quickly rally together, upstage him and make him see reason. At the start of the revolt, the King and the male folk elusively assume that threats and warnings are sufficient to send their wives and daughters back to their homes and farms. When they realize that the women are more determined than they thought, the King attempts to use coercion which again fails. Female power, through sisterhood becomes even more evident when the King's young, beautiful and pampered wife sides with her mothers in the

revolt against her husband. When the King attempts to victimize the soothsayer by making false allegations against him, his young wife contradicts him and refuses publicly that Alabi had ever made sexual overtures towards her. In the face of resistance and revolt even from the woman to whom he has invested so much emotional energy, the King has nothing to do than to yield to the demands of the people.

The women in *Ancestral Earth* are the dominant entity and the centre of power in the community; they earn more money as seen in the fact that their husbands have to rely on their incomes to dowry new wives. They manage to feed the family even in the heart of famine when men retire to palm wine bars to drink their miseries. They are unafraid of the leader and rally together for a change in the status quo when the men do nothing. It is clear that the privileged entity in Jacques Derrida's theory of binary opposition is that entity that holds economic and political might. Though they live in a society that is androgynous, the women in *Ancestral Earth* hold and wield enormous power, this is opposed to the popular claim that women in African societies are marginalized. The women know the amount of power they have in the society; they know when and how to exercise this power and they understand the power dynamics of the society. When men fail to exercise power where it is needed, the women step in and take control of the situation. The King and the other men see no outlet but to yield to the pressure of the women.

CONCLUSION

Although (Ambanasom 2003, 63) argues that African male writers often present women "in roles limited to motherhood, marriage and related domestic concerns, while scenes for great events are the exclusive domains of the male characters", in the works of Nkengasong we find a situation wherein women take central stage to reverse the environmental disaster caused by male recklessness as seen in *Ancestral Earth*. Also evident are situation where the female gender uses the same inferior and subservient roles of motherhood and marriage as tools for the manipulation and exploitation of the male gender. Akwenoh is a prototypical symbol of this kind of woman because she uses her role as wife and mother to manipulate the instinct, vision and behavior of Hon Mbutuku to the point where the man engages in hideous political activities as a mean to prove to his wife that he too matters in the society. The female characters in Nkengasong's works also exploit the inadequacies of the men to their advantage. It is apparent from the analysis that women have the potential to control formal power even from the margins to which patriarchal societies relegate them. Nkengasong's therefore uses his works as templates for the examination of human society and the ramifications of engaging in certain social/sexual behaviours.

The analysis has demonstrated from two perspectives that women possess the power to control not just the males in their lives but also those who control formal power structures. It has shown that, though dominantly absent from formal power structures, the women in the women in Nkengasong's work engage in the manipulation of male instinct in which case the female character's use their sexual and sensual potentials to control the mind-frame, behaviour and decisions of men. This is evidence both at the individual level as seen in the love triangle and fight between two males created by Akwenoh in *The Widow's Might*, and at the community level as seen in the women's influence on the male village leadership in *Ancestral Earth*. The analysis has also shown that male characters have several inadequacies that make them susceptible to female control. These inadequacies do not only exhibit themselves in individual

sexual or marital relationships, but also in the way they wield power. The communal revolutions against the excesses of male leadership or the crisis engendered by the failures of male dominated power systems are led by women.

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