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RECONFIGURATION OF WOMEN IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

The oppression of women has been a salient feature of societies across the globe. Consequently, there has been a continuous effort to write liberation literature to emancipate women from the yoke of patriarchal thought. This paper examines the gender politics articulated by selected authors. The novels have been identified to survey the plight of women in three geographical locations; East, West and South Africa. The aim of this research is to reveal that these writers (re)place the selected female characters in an attempt to subvert the historical conditions of women in African societies. The study reads Ngugi wa Thiong'o's political women in Matigari (1987), Petals of Blood (1977), A Grain of Wheat (1967), Tsitsi Dangarembga's women conditions in Nervous Conditions (1988), Mariama Bâ's resolute Muslim woman in So Long a Letter (1986), and Ousmane Sembène's bits of women in God's Bits of Wood (1962). This study concludes that these texts succeed in reconfiguring the woman through subversive strategies.

KEYWORDS

Patriarchy, Gender, Stereotype, Subversion, Politics, Culture.

INTRODUCTION

The African novel has been a critical genre as a discursive agent of the perennial gender debate across Africa. This paper begins by situating the selected novelists as authors who have deliberately attempted to liberate the African woman through fictional intervention. Eko posits that Ngugi is "a groundbreaking example of the modern African male author's shift from portraying women as objectives to that of subjects" (Eko, 1986, p. 212). In this aspect, this paper shows Ngugi's urgency in portraying women political figures in the two texts. Erenrich

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describes Ngugi as a writer "who dreamed of a better world and risked everything to make it real" (Erenrich, 2010, p. 81). Part of Ngugi's dream is indeed championing for the cause of women through his works.

In the preface of *Secret Lives*, Ngugi empirically captures the contemporary barriers Kenyan females faced at the time:

> As I write I remember the nights of fighting in my father's house; my mother's struggle with the soil so that we might eat, have decent clothes and get some schooling; my elder brother, Wallace Mwangi, running to the cover and security of the forest under a hail of bullets from colonial policemen; his messages from the forest urging me to continue with education at any cost;…uncles and other villagers murdered because they had taken the oath; the beautiful courage of ordinary men and women in Kenya who stood up to the might of British imperialism and indiscriminate terrorism…I remember the fears, the betrayals, Rachael's tears, the moments of despair and love and kinship in struggle and I try to find meaning of it all through my pen. (Ngugi, n.p.)

Dangarembga's circumstances as a female writer in Zimbabwe in the late 1980's were difficult. Rodgers (2013) writes that although Dangarembga does not outright accuse the Literature Bureau of preventing the publication of her novel, she does help to convey the state of affairs and the general view of the governmental branch that is described above. Rodgers notes that Dangarembga describes a publishing industry that had little interest in accurate depictions of the lives of real Zimbabwean women and, perhaps, less interest in female authorship. Zwicker notes that "in several interviews [Dangarembga] has told the story of how the manuscript languished in a publishing house until she asked for its return" (Zwicker, 2002, p. 4). Dangarembga comments:

> I had the distinct impression, that the sympathetic young male editor found these women [characters] too nasty to be allowed to exist… it seems to be very difficult for men to accept the things about women write and want to write about and the men are the publishers (Zwicker, 2002, p. 5).

It is on the above premise that this paper interrogates the conditions of Dangarembga's women and the female agency espoused in a text that the Zimbabwean Literature Bureau ostensibly was uncomfortable with. Doris Lessing explains that the novel faced opposition because, "it was criticized by male critics as being 'negative', and presenting an unfair picture of the lives of black women" (Wilkinson, 1992, p. 3). Dangarembga however insists that she wrote "of things I had observed and had had direct experience with, larger than any one person's own tragedies…a wider implication and origin and therefore were things that needed to be told" (Wilkinson, 1992, p. 190).

Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ is primarily recognized for her contributions to African feminism and Francophone literature. Though she rejected the term "feminist" in reference to herself, Bâ's novels have largely been considered as texts that heighten the feminist voice in the African novel. Essentially, Bâ has been critical of religious tendencies in women oppression. Diallo suggests that "the articulation of culture and religion to dominate women in patriarchal system, is a major part of the nest of oppressions upon women in Ba's narrative world, and is also a pronounced sign of Ba's intersectional feminism." (Diallo, 2020, p. 14) Diallo also argues that Bâ demonstrates an uncompromising dedication to oppose what she views as an approach to Islamic teachings that is male-oriented in her narrative works. This kind of skewed interpretation of the scripture is done in an effort to elevate cultural norms. In this regard, this paper explores how Bâ presents the subversive Muslim woman in So Long a Letter.

Sembène, although not an historian captures the historical facts of the railroad workers strike in God's Bits of Wood. About the right of a literary writer to comment on history, Sembène claims that:

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> The artist is here to reveal a certain number of historical facts that others would like to keep hidden....Wolof society has always had people whose role it was to give voice, bring back to memory, and project towards something. (Gadjigo et al, 1993, p. 101-102)

Although the text offers a historical account of the strike through fiction, the novel also contributes to gender politics of the Senegalese society of the 1950's. This paper thus interrogates the effects of the strike and Sembène's (re)placement of female characters in the novel.

DISCUSSION

Ngugi's Political Women

In Matigari we encounter Wambui, an old woman whom Matigari meets in his quest for "truth and justice." She is the metaphorical figure of the female power in the fight against postcolonial injustices. She represents the women wing that offers a supportive role to Matigari, the protagonist of the novel. Ngugi manipulates the traditional conventions which relegate the woman to homestead care when he makes Wambui say to us: "let me continue sweeping this dirt that has quickly accumulated in our country!" (Ngugi, 1986 p. 88). There is an intentional attempt to highlight the value of women in sociopolitical movements, Ngugi metaphorically brings the woman to the political stage. Ngugi thus negates gender stereotypes that project the woman as an inferior being. Inhadi argues that:

> Gender stereotyping has been prominent in literature for centuries up to the present day. This stereotyping commonly follows the norms that are emphasized by patriarchy. Patriarchy itself is an ideology that privileges men by promoting traditional gender roles. According to these roles, patriarchal men must be rational, strong, protective and decisive; while patriarchal women must be weak, nurturing and submissive (Inhadi, 2020, p. 1).

On the contrary to these gender roles described by Inhadi, Ngugi's Wambui is a strong political figure who is conscious to the political dirt that must be delt with boldly. She aspires for a sanitized political environment that is not oppressive to the ordinary masses. Ngugi's positive portraying of women can be ascribed to his revisionist stance of male writers. Sougou explains:

> There has been a sustained focus in the flawed portraiture of women in male writing, yet more and more male creative writers are striving to draw images of women from an increasingly gender sensitive perspective. They endeavour to depict women in positive roles and emphasize their agency in society. (Sougou, 2010, p. 87)

On this debate on revisioning women in the African novel, Davies (1986) sums up that:

> Revisionist criticism of African literature then has as one of its tasks the truthful assessment of the literary image of women. It must therefore approach already well criticized texts/authors from a critical posture which seeks to reveal and thereby correct some of these attitudes and in so doing challenge authors to project a complete picture of African social reality. (Davies, 1986, p. 75)

Guthera appears at the moment when Matigari, in search of the truth, realizes that he should have started looking for women. The kind of women "who uphold the flame of continuity and change in the homestead" (Ngugi, 1986, p. 27). Matigari thus is also conscious of the pivotal role that women can play in political liberation. He is appreciative of women, holding them in esteemed high regard as opposed to the traditional relegation of women to nothingness. Ngugi seems to suggest that women may as well be viewed as agents of truth. Change in

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the society consequently, as Matigari realizes, is not possible without women. It is no wonder Guthera chooses to explore her sexuality, to rescue Matigari, the "patriot who survived the bullets" (Ngugi, 1986, p. 20). To achieve Matigari's freedom, Guthera engages in sexual intercourse with a policeman, not for pleasure but for a political cause. In this regard, Ngugi sexualizes the African woman body by seeing it as a source of freedom for the African man.

Guthera's engagement in consensual sex with the policeman implies that she has the ability to choose freely what she can do with her body. Guthera thus explores female sexuality as a powerful means of political liberation. She uses sex to dominate the policeman who thereafter has no choice than grant freedom to Matigari. Guthera is aware of social understanding of sex as "a resource that men desire and women poses…and to obtain sex, men must offer women other desired resources in return, such as money, commitment, security, attention, or respect" (Baumeister & Twenge, 2002, p. 168).

As the narrative progresses, Guthera becomes a formidable feminine agent of sociopolitical change. Thus, she shoulders the burden of awareness:

> Is it enough for me just to say that now I know? . . . What can we as women do to change our lives? Or will we continue to follow the paths carved out for us by men? Aren't we in the majority anyway? Let's go! From now on I want to be in the vanguard. I shall never be left behind again. (Ngugi, 1987, p. 140)

The old Nyakinyua in Petals of Blood is pivotal in the preservation of Illmorog. She is an actual impediment to dishonest and fraudulent politicians in the postcolonial society articulated in the text. In her advanced age, Nyakinyua participates in protest march to the city to stop the likely invasion of Illmorog by greedy politicians. In rallying the masses against the political class, Nyakinyua employs her mastery of oral literature to persuade the locals. She challenges the crowd with a riddle; "If a thread was broken to whom were the pieces thrown to mend them into a new thread?" (Ngugi, 1977, p. 209). Her engagement with oral literary renditions suggests Nyakinyua's attempt to manipulate language and pass a cultural message. Ngugi illuminates this point when he writes thus:

> a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries. Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other … Language carries culture, and culture, particularly through orature and literature, carries the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world… Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (Ngugi, 1981, p. 15-16)

This is a similar twist as in the one in A Grain of Wheat where Ngugi's concept of the complementary role of man and woman is emphasized:

> He would now carve a thin man, with hard lines on his face, shoulders and head bent, supporting the weight. His right hand would stretch to link with that of a woman, also with hard lines on her face. The third figure would be that of a child on whose head or shoulders the two hands of the man and woman would meet. (Ngugi, 1967, p. 279)

Mumbi in A Grain of Wheat is a typical hardworking woman who seeks not to rely on anyone. She is determined to work for herself and for the family. Mumbi thus emerges as a resilient female character whose firm resolution to tackle hunger and poverty is evident. She is a farm laborer in the European farmlands and though subjected

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to poor working conditions, Mumbi reports that "we worked in their large farms tea-plantations, sometimes digging out Muthangari grass and at times gathering the tea-leaves. With the money I earned, I bought flour which kept the five of us alive" (Ngugi, 1967, p. 166). While Mumbi and other women suffer subjugation from the white man, they are also oppressed by the African man. In essence, the African woman is involved in a double tragedy; exploitation by two men. It is unfortunate for Mumbi that Karanja an African man, physically harasses her instead of providing safety and defense against the colonial master. In a bold attempt however, Mumbi is assertive not to "accept any more help from Karanja, who by now had worked his way up and was the leader of the home guards" (Ngugi, 1967, p. 166).

Dangarembga's Women Conditions

Pauline Ada Uwakweh (1995), identifies three categories of women characters in the Nervous Conditions: (a) the escaped females; (b) the entrapped females, and (c) the rebellious females. This paper closely focuses on Uwakweh's third aspect. Tambudzai in the text tells of the real status of women in the colonized Rhodesia. She explains to her daughter, Mainini that:

> this business of womanhood is a heavy burden...how could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear the children? When it is like that you can't just decide today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made you are the one who has to make them...And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other. Aiwa! What will help you, my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 16)

Caroline Rooney, (cited in Gurnah,1995), points out that although Nervous Conditions is set in the Rhodesia war of liberation, the writer makes little reference to this, choosing to address issues of women's emancipation:

> the war areas in the novel are within the patriarchal family. If Nervous Conditions is critically angled as a response to Bones or to The Wretched of the Earth, then it contrastingly deflects attention from national appeals to the question of inequities between families (the elite and non-elite) and especially to the question of the inequities and tyrannies within a 'model middle-class family'. If charity begins at home (and Nervous Conditions is about family charity), then so, perhaps, does war. (Rooney, cited in Gurnah, 1995, p. 135)

The women in Nervous Conditions, subvert cultural norms by wedging rebellion against the patriarchal outfit. Tambu and Nyasha for example epitomize this rebellion. Tambu voices her frustration with masculinity:

> feeling bad for her (Nyasha) and thinking how dreadfully familiar that scene had been, with Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness just as I had felt victimised at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimisation, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. Men took it everywhere with them...but what I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to femaleness. Femaleness as opposed to maleness. (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 118)

Tambu particularly rebels against her father's decision to stop educating her in favor of her brother. When Tambu insists "but I want to go to school", her father scornfully asks her "can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables" (15). Tambu's father epitomizes the traditional patriarchal man who stereotypes women to caregivers. He finds fault in Tambu's thirst for education instead of aspiring to learn how to cook for her future husband. Sekhukhune describes stereotyping as follows:

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> Most of these stereotypes which are, for the moment, exemplified by idiomatic and proverbial expressions, have relegated the social status of women to that of a nonentity. The gender role stereotypes of men have acquired aggressive qualities and command absolute power and authority, while those of women demonstrate a lack of assertiveness and certainty. (Sekhukhune, 1994, p. 3)

The above assertion is indicative of the stereotype gender roles that Tambu's father subscribes to. It therefore comes as no surprise that he is keen on educating his son, Nhamo and not Tambu the daughter. In advancing education for the boychild Jeremiah is equipping the son with social power while demonstrating that his daughter must show submissiveness and powerlessness.

Tambu however defiantly decides to plant maize for commercial purposes. This would in turn help her pay school fees for herself. According to Grady (1997), Tambu develops great aspirations for her personal education despite the obstacles she faces: race, class, and sex. Tambu's defiance eventually pays off because she emancipates herself by embracing education as a tool to conquer the masculine projections.

Similarly, Nyasha represents female assertiveness that insists on alternative gender construction. She is categorical that she does not want to be "anyone's underdog" (Dangarembga p. 119). Hence, Uwakweh (1995) writes that:

> Nyasha is the rebellious female. She has had the benefit of a British education and knows first-hand what kind of lives women in Europe lead. She is ever aware of the difference in the way Shona women are treated compared with the treatment of British women. Unlike her mother, Nyasha has no memories of traditions and customs to silence her voice. Instead she finds herself caught between two worlds. Her schoolmates shun her for white mannerisms and she has no Shona mannerisms to fall back on. Nyasha is truly a woman without a home, and as she struggles to make a place for herself in society, she finds that effort may just kill her (Uwakweh, 1995, p. 3).

Nyasha, confronts Babamukuru in a scathing attack when he "condemns her to whoredom" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 115) when Tambu stays out late at night after a school concert. In this demeaning insult, we recognize the gendered form of abuse. Babamukuru's insult belittling and taunting as well as threatening and manipulative. Insinuating that Nyasha is a whore amounts to a typical gendered insult. A gendered insult "is any word or phrase which is disproportionately applied to a member of a particular gender, and which generally bears some connection to societal expectations or norms placed upon that gender." (Scruton, 2017, p. 7). This implies that the term whore in the case of this novel semantically targets the female person. In this demeaning projection however, Tambu asserts herself as a woman who is able to make her own decisions. She is weary of Babamukuru "making her a victim of femaleness" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 115).

Bâ's Resolute Muslim Woman

In So Long a Letter, Bâ presents female characters who seek to be in charge of their destiny. Aissatou for example is an exemplary character who rejects the polygamous nature of her society. She does not wish to share her husband with any other woman. It comes as no surprise thus when we find out that Aissatou is brave enough to leave her marriage after her husband subscribes to the polygamous idea. Aissatou takes the husband's move as an act of betrayal since it meant that there loved would be intruded by a stranger. According to Ajayi Omofolabi in Negritude, Feminism and a Quest for Identity, it is almost like the "institution of polygamy is totally incompatible with any hope of female happiness or self-expression" (p. 44). In this regard, Aissatou is critical of polygamy. It is visible that she sees the institution as deceptive to the woman, and only serves to gratify the selfish needs of a man.

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Ousmane's bits of Women

While Sembène's God's Bits of Wood is largely about a railroad worker's strike in colonial Senegal of 1940's, the text also tackles the treatment of women in a patriarchal society. For instance, the novel presents the tumultuous marital life of Bakayoko and Assitan. It is critical to note that the burden of this marriage is largely carried by the woman. Bakayako's condescending attitude towards his wife and the marital relationship is revealed in the following passage:

> By the ancient rules of Africa, Assitan was a perfect wife: docile, submissive, and hard-working; she never spoke one word louder than another. She knew nothing of her husband's activities...Her parents of course, had arranged everything, without even consulting her. She was as submissive to Ibrahim as she had been to his brother but that was his lot as a man, as a master. Her own lot as a woman was to accept things as they were and to remain silent, as she had been taught to...This wall that has always been between them was difficult to tear down. It had been built a long time ago, on the first day of the union that custom had forced on them. Months had gone by then before Bakayoko could bring himself to the accomplishment of his conjugal duties. But Assitan had been brought up according to all the ancient rules and customs. She lived on the margins of her husband's existence: a life of work, silence and patience. It would have been hard to know whether Bakayoko ever felt remorseful for his infidelities to her, for this man's thoughts were secrets from the world (Sembène, 1962, p. 106, 238).

From the above comment, it is certain that Assitan endures an oppressive marriage. But by patriarchal standards, she is regarded a good wife. She has been taught to submit to a man and view him as a master. This is reminiscent of Binti Sheikh's Utendi wa Mwana Kupona that offers advice of wifely duties and virtues:

Nawe radhi mumeo,	Let your husband be content with you,
Siku zote mkaao.	All the days you dwell together.
Siku mukhibatariwao,	On the Day when ye are chosen,
Awe radhi mekuwiya. (Stanza 24)	May he be happy and hold it due to you.
Keti naye kwa adabu	Live with him befittingly
Usimtie ghadhabu	Do not provoke him to anger.
Akinena, simjibu;	If he rebukes you, do not answer back;
Itahidi kunyamaa. (Stanza 28)	Endeavour to control your tongue.

Assitan follows the dictates of Mwana Kupona's wifely advice. She is submissive to her husband and men in general. She seemingly does not question her husband's actions and promiscuous ways lest she be labeled a dissident wife. Even when her sexual desires are not satisfied by her husband, Assitan must not complain but rather exercise patience. Her docile nature "represents an ideal feminine characteristic expected of a woman, particularly in a conjugal sphere…" (Mutunda, 2016, p. 521).

Conversely, Sembène, just like Ngugi depicts political women. In defiance of general women stereotypes, Sembène projects women who take up leadership roles. The striking feature of these women is their resilience to endure government brutality in their quest for justice. Such female characters in God's Bits of Wood, join men in protest against deplorable working conditions of rail workers. Penda for example is categorical that women voice will be heard:

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> I speak in the name of all the women, but I am just the voice they have chosen to tell you what they have decided to do. Yesterday we all laughed together, men and women, and today we weep together, but for us women, this strike still means the possibility of a better life tomorrow. We owe it to ourselves to hold up our heads and not to give in now…Men, you must allow your wives to come with us! Everywoman here who is capable of walking should be with us tomorrow! (Sembène, 1962, p. 185)

Penda is aware of the deplorable proletariat condition. She is aware of the difficult state of workers and takes it upon herself to champion for the liberation of the working class. Mbah, B. M. and E. E. Mbah (2017) explain the nature of the class struggle thus:

> In a nutshell, Marxism argues that the way goods and services are produced, distributed, used (and by whom) in a capitalist economy inevitably leads to conflict between social classes; the conflict will be between those who own the processes of production, and those who expend their energy to produce the goods and services, who ultimately get less than their fair share in the distribution of the gains of their sweat. The rich hold the belief that their class is superior to that of the others and inclusive of those therein and would want to perpetuate the status quo ante bellum. (Mbah & Mbah, 2017, p. 273)

Penda insists therefore that the strike is important as a mode of uprising against the superior class. She agitates for better terms of service for the workers so that their wages are commensurate to the work they do. Penda's ethos marks the culmination of the over four days women's march from Thiès to Dakar. This mark of women bravery ultimately pays off as the French capitalists ultimately heed to the calls of workers. The women's unprecedented anti-colonial protest march elevates the position of the women because "that's more than men could do" (Sembène, 1962, p. 211). Sembène recounts that:

> They [women] marched in well-ordered ranks, ten abreast, and without any masculine escort, now. They carried banners and pennants printed with slogans, some of them reading, even bullets could not stop us; we demand family allowances ... for equal work, equal pay- old age pensioners-proper housing. (Sembène, 1962, p. 214)

Penda's political stamina is posthumously celebrated when Lahbib, writing to Bakayoko says, "She was a brave girl. I know that you know her better than I do, I don't know of anything we can do for her now, but if you should know of something I do not, tell me" (Sembène,1962, p. 228).

Ramatoulaye is equally another bold woman character in the novel. She is fearless and thus confronts anyone intending to harm her family. She assumes the role of a provider, protector and leader of women and children whom she fondly refers to as "God's bits of wood". Her resilience is captured when she tells us in no uncertain terms that:

> I knew that God was with me and I knew that it is possible to die of hunger, and that Houdia M'baye had milk. God knows all these things, too ...I told my brother Mabigue this morning that I would kill Vendredi, but God is my witness that it was not because of that I did it. It was because we were hungry- we were all too hungry for it to go on. The men know it, too, but they go away in the morning and don't come back until the night has come and they do not see ... Being the head of a family is a heavy burden- too heavy for a woman. We must have help ...When you know that the life and the spirit of others depend on your life and your spirit, you have no right to be afraid- even when you are terribly afraid. In the cruel times we are living through we must find our own strength, somehow, and force ourselves to be hard (Sembène, 1962, p. 69).

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In the above passage, it is clear that men have abdicated their role as heads of the family. Sembène thus is quick to substitute such men with brave women who embrace the position and execute their new mandate wholeheartedly.

Maimouna is yet another key female character in the novel. She is a blind woman but her optimistic existentialism propels her will to live. She confronts the absurd, including the loss of her child and is strengthened by the horrendous experiences of other women such as a poor starving grappling with the futility of breast-feeding her equally sick, starving child:

> Her breast was now nothing more than a slack and empty parcel of fresh. The baby seized it with his tiny fists, sucking greedily, his eyes closed, his head jerking awkwardly back and forth. The breast was already so riddled with scars and pricks that it seemed to have been stuck with pins, and he hurt her. She moved him from one arm to the other and put his mouth to her other breast, but she knew that it would serve no purpose, her milk was exhausted. (Sembène, 1962, p. 55)

Maimouna is Sembène's existentialist heroine who has no desire to flee from reality. She chooses revolt as a strategy to defeat the absurd conditions of her life; her blindness, death of her child and the miserable plight of women. Camus argues that:

> ... in order for man to remain true to the conditions of absurdity in which he undeniably finds himself; he must reject suicide and the leap to faith, and enter into that hopeless confrontation between man's questioning and the silence of the world. Thus the most fundamental human act which is the first decisive revolt against the meaninglessness of life is to choose life and to establish it as the only necessary good. In other words, it is revolt that gives a man's life value and meaning. (Camus, 1975, p.18)

Maimouna also exhibits the existentialist principle of freedom of choice when she chooses to actively participate in the cause of the workers. Sartre (1957) explains that man is destined to be free because, once placed into the world, he bears responsibility for all of his actions; in other words, freedom is ingrained in man by default. Sartre holds that as man is free, he must define his own essence and moral principles. Maimouna's essence is thus derived from her quest for justice for the proletariat. She creates meaning of her own life around the strong desire to emancipate the society's poor class despite her disability. Her engagement of the narrative of the legend of Goumba is a source of inspiration for the fighters who must press on to liberate the workers. Maimouna represents the feminine spiritual power; the "woman who had measured her strengths against that of men" (Sembène 1962, p. 198).

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown how Ngugi's political women subvert the political terrain in his novels. These female characters thus epitomize the modern woman who fights for political space in an attempt alter the status quo and carry on the aspirations of the working class. Dangarembga's female characters are portrayed as assertive beings who reject subordination and submission to patriarchal dictates. Bâ on her part has been illuminous in her text by revising the male-subjective interpretation of the scripture in an attempt to emancipate the Muslim woman. Sembène has successfully shown how culture and religion are tools of oppression. His text has thus consequently depicted bold female characters who take up family leadership roles. The paper also concludes that Sembène designs existential heroines who, more than their male counterparts, confront the absurd.

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