Chapter 6

"A woman is nothing. Yet, a woman is everything!"¹

Wars Against Men

... the colonized woman is doubly oppressed, enmeshed in the structure of an indigenous patriarchy and of a foreign masculinist-colonialism. ...²

- Florence Stratton

A woman is a preserver of culture and tradition, a nurturer, a story-teller; she is a mother, a wife, a mistress; she is passive, dominated, silenced, restricted to the domestic sphere; she is a body, a “womb on two feet.”³ She is a wo-man. Does she have an identity independent of man, independent of her body? Histories of civilizations stand witness to the fact that a woman’s voice, her thoughts, her experiences, her stories, her “Soliloquies,” have been denied an independent presence. This chapter questions such hierarchization based on gender distinctions, whereby—histories of most of the cultural groups of the world have repeatedly highlighted how—a woman and a man decline to share an equal space to speak, to engage in dialogue, to understand each other’s “Soliloquies.”

The tendency to objectify women leading to a dismissal of the significance of their presence, of their voice, is highlighted by feminist writers from the West, like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous.¹ The subjugation of women has not only been prevalent in Western countries but is also witnessed in the once-colonized
parts of the world. Women in almost every country, every ethnic group—from the third-world—have been victims of patriarchal domination, have been relegated to the realm of negligence, and have been constructed not only as per the whims of men in their indigenous societies but also equally by the marauding groups of colonizers.

Oyewumi contests the distinction made between men and women on the basis of superiority and inferiority. She considers it to be an entirely Western concept, and denies the existence of such notions in African cultures. Western feminists consider gender to be a biological construction. She emphasizes that gender is also a cultural construction, and cannot be restricted to Western notions of gender; as she writes:

The difficulty of applying feminist concepts to express and analyze African realities is the central challenge of African gender studies. The fact that western gender categories are presented as inherent in nature (of bodies) and operate on a dichotomous, binarily opposed male/female, man/woman duality in which the male is assumed to be superior and therefore the defining category, is particularly alien to many African cultures. (“Conceptualizing Gender” 4)

It is very important to take into consideration Oyewumi’s argument, according to which, claims regarding women’s experiences in African cultures cannot and should not be made from the perspectives put forth by women from societies in the West, since gender is socially and culturally constructed. Therefore, experiences of women in different societies and cultures differ from each other.
I would like to argue that, even among the cultural groups in the African continent, distinctions are made among men and women—in terms of superiority and inferiority—and women have been subjected to domination at the hands of indigenous men, during and after the colonial rule. This aspect is discussed in details, later in the chapter. The underlying truth remains that: "... most of the time (on the African continent, for example), nationalist politics depoliticizes women’s politics, forcing the repoliticization of women’s politics back on the national agenda only as an aftermath of nationalist struggles" (Nnaemeka 2). Even in matrilineal communities, the typical patriarchal worldview of the West has been implemented during colonialism, resulting in the inferior status of women in their indigenous societies and in their families, after the imposition of the colonial culture, as has been the case with the diverse ethnic groups in Africa. The anthropologist Chinyere Ukpokolo highlights the importance associated with kolanut and praying to the Earth goddess in Igbo culture, also pointing out the fact that it is the impact of colonialism which has resulted in the denial of worth attached to the Earth goddess during the kolanut ritual, symbolizing the loss of significance of the position and the voice of the female.

Women in colonized countries have been doubly suppressed, by patriarchy as well as by colonization. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie takes into consideration the diverse ethnic groups in Africa, and points out that: "Across distance and boundaries in history and society, women have been placed on pedestals as goddesses, but imprisoned within domestic injustice . . . They have been romanticized in literature and lyrics, but commercialized in life . . . " (107). Under the rule of the Empire, "the image of nation or culture as a mother worked to evoke both female power and female helplessness" (Loomba 182). It is significant to
consider Spivak’s contention in this regard, that: “... both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (287). Taking the abolition of sati as an example—in the case of India—she brings forth the existence of two “dialectically interlocking sentences”: “White men are saving brown women from brown men” and “The women wanted to die” (297). But how is the woman getting a voice here? Spivak writes: “Imperialism’s image as the establisher of good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind. How should one examine the dissimulation of patriarchal strategy, which apparently grants the woman free choice as subject?” (299).

In India, there have been several instances which lay emphasis on the voicelessness of women, during and after the colonial rule. The “[w]oman, like any other term can only find its meaning in a complex series of differentiations, of which the most important, or at least the most immediate, is man” (MacCabe xix). Partha Chatterjee, in uncovering the discourse put forth by Rāmkrṣṇa kathāmrta, highlights how “woman and gold” (62) were being treated as trappings to material things. The woman is here depicted as “a fearsome sexuality that lures, ensnares, and imprisons the true self of man” (62). The text turns the woman-figure into a mother-figure devoid of sexuality, in order that a man can lead a life of non-attachment. Ramakrishna has never been in support of the emerging idea of the “new” woman who would receive education. The education of women was barred by the patriarchal Indian society. Meenakshi Mukherjee in analyzing the novels of Krupa Satthianadhan, writes how in Saguna and Kamala, women who wanted to be educated, were
considered "odd." Saguna’s mother brought her from boarding school to home, for “[s]he learns too much . . . ;” (76) and Kamala’s mother-in-law was “fairly tired” of Kamala because—as Mukherjee quotes from the novel—“She causes much disturbance when here . . . what with her mad fits of learning . . . [she] is not at all like the other girls . . .” (76).

Woman—in most of the postcolonial countries, like Nigeria and India—was constructed as a symbol for the “nation,” embodying the “spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity and so on” (Chatterjee 131). Chatterjee lays emphasis on the “Women’s Question” in India, and writes that: “. . . the colonial mind was able to transform . . . [the] figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country” (118). The “tradition” was itself brought into existence “by assuming the hegemony of Brahmanical religious texts and the complete submission of all Hindus to the dictates of those texts . . . [which] was to be criticized and reformed” (119). He strongly puts forth the idea that the discourse of nationalism “is a discourse about women; women do not speak here” (133). Bringing up the notion of the “new woman,” who is educated, he underlines how the “new woman . . . was subjected to a new patriarchy,” (127) a patriarchal structure that “bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination” (130). Thus, the status of women in colonized countries, such as India, has been relegated to an inferior position.

In the case of diverse societies and communities in Africa, women have experienced different kinds of treatment from indigenous men and colonizers, pertaining to their societal structures and traditions. But, what has ultimately ensued, is the oppression of women, denying them their individual voice, as has been pointed out—in Leslie’s comment—earlier. Most of the gender theorists in Africa have highlighted the fact that the
hierarcization of the categories of male/female, men/women, have been maintained in most of the cultural groups in the African continent, during and after the rule of the Empire. Be it within the family or outside home, women have been subjected to various kinds of domination, during and after the colonial rule. T. Akachi Ezeigbo brings out the fact that: “The female gender is viewed as inferior to the male in most cultures and this perception has led to men playing primary roles in the home and outside the home while women play secondary roles. Even the Igbo culture, which prides itself as being very democratic, is no exception to this rule” (189-190).

Talking about *Umuada* (association of daughters) and *Alutaradi* (association of wives), she brings out the significance and power of *Umuada* in upholding and fighting for the rights of women in Igbo community. However, some of their decisions have been questioned by Igbo women themselves. They “have been accused of enforcing retrogressive and cruel customs that have traumatized or harmed widows in many parts of Igbo land,” (193) which has led some Igbo women writers to argue that: “... it is the structure of the patriarchy that is responsible for the way widows are treated and that *Umuada*, the daughters of the lineage are controlled by patriarchy and function as its cultural arm and implement its demands” (193). Ezeigbo argues that the patriarchal structure of Igbo community is not only a result of colonization but it has always existed even before colonial rule. She uncovers the limitations experienced by an Igbo woman, being always stuck to her “so-called natural roles as a wife and a mother” (190).

Other African theorists of gender highlight the dualism inherent in Igbo cosmology, which opens out equal space for men as well as women. Ukpokolo takes up the symbol of *oji* (kolanut) in Igbo culture, and upholds how the kolanut ritual emphasizes a philosophy of
life where men and women gain equal importance: "... the invocation of the Earth goddess in the ritual creates space for female participation and involvement. Her position, role and the fact that she must, of necessity, be included, ensures a voice for the Igbo woman in peacemaking. ... The kolanut aims at perpetuating peace, love, and unity" (172). Also, in the use of *ofo* during performing rituals, she brings out the necessity to invoke the Earth goddess, which is symbolic of "the female representation," and "[i]n this interconnectedness, man and woman engage in mutual participation in peace building processes" (178). This gets disrupted after the imposition of the colonial culture. Jell-Bahlsen upholds the Igbo belief of the supreme authority of the Mother, as expressed in the Igbo word *Nneka*:

One of Igbo civilization’s core values was expressed in the name, *Nneka*, *Mother is Supreme*. The name, *Nneka*, illuminates the Igbo respect for motherhood. Furthermore, the importance of female kinship links is expressed in Igbo proverbs such as, ‘when in trouble, run to your mother’s home,’ (when something stands, something else stands beside it). (202)

Oyewumi also upholds the absence of hierarchy among men and women in Africa, and talks about the non-gendered family structure in Yoruba culture, emphasizing the absence of a patriarchal structure in Yoruba families, which are not alike the gendered nuclear families in Western countries.¹⁰

Although there have been divergent views among women writers regarding the structure of West African societies before colonization, they seem to agree with each other regarding the fact that colonialism has been responsible for the imposition of a patriarchal
societal structure, resulting in the domination of women. Judith Van Allen highlights the “imposed class and sex stratification” (75) by British colonials. She writes how—in attempting to structure political institutions as per the Western model—the colonial rulers have denied “group solidarity” and “shared political authority,” hardly leaving out any space for women (75). Together, the “colonial government, foreign investment, and the church—contributed to the growth of a system of political and economic stratification... that led to the current concentration of national political power in the hands of a small, educated, wealthy, male elite” (75). Oyewumi’s words are extremely significant to consider here:

... the colonial state was also a male-dominant state; colonial racism and colonial sexism were intertwined in complex ways. The European colonizers not only had favorite races and “tribes”; they also had a favorite gender. . . . In effect, at the moment of independence, Africans had an additional task of transforming the structures of male privilege and female exclusion that had been laid down. . . . Africa’s colonization by Europeans in a sense was a gift to white people, and a boon for both white and African men, albeit in varying degrees. For the colonizers and their inheritors, it is a gift that keeps on giving. However, for African men, it is a toxic gift. And alas, those who would transform Africa are also the class and gender beneficiaries of the colonial state. This is at the core of why male dominance continues to gain footholds and to expand in our current dispensation. . . . (“Decolonizing the Intellectual” 29-30)

She emphasizes that the male-dominant worldview of the West has been internalized by African cultures and societies, which needs to be done away with.
African cultural traditions and proverbs turn out to be very much gendered when translated into English, which leads to a misinterpretation of the traditions. Oyewumi raises her voice against such “patriarchalization of our [Yoruba] lives, history, and traditions” (“Decolonizing the Intellectual” 10). Ukpokolo also points out that the Igbo kolanut ritual has been patriarchalized after colonial intervention:

[The] omission of the Earth goddess . . . signifies the denial of the female position and voice, which Western civilization, represented by the Victorian notion of the woman in society, embodies, a representation that was transferred to Igbo society and many African societies through colonialism.

(175)

Jell-Bahlsen, as well, has questioned the Christian construction of Igbo culture. She underlines how the Catholic Church, by associating Igbo women only with sex, disgraces women healers by calling them witches. She writes that: “This negative perception of womanhood is antithetical to associating sex with procreation . . . and by extension a reverence of motherhood as expressed in the name, Nneka” (216).

Van Allen points out how the imposition of patriarchal structure by British colonials on Igbo society, has been done “indirectly, by new economic structures, and directly, by the recruitment of only men into the Native Administration” (80). There is a lack of an adequate space for women. Why do the “Soliloquies” of men and women deter themselves from breaking out into dialogues, with a space for mutual understanding and respect? Jell-Bahlsen repeatedly highlights the Igbo worldview which “calls for mutual tolerance . . . social equilibrium and mutual respect” (217). In fact, it is very interesting to consider the notion of
“Snail Sense Womanism” advocated by Ezeigbo, calling for mutual cooperation and
collaboration between men and women, to engage in a dialogue with each other: “My own
gender theory, Snail Sense Womanism, is ‘a strategy that allows women to collaborate and
cooperate with men to bring about social change, even as a snail ‘collabrates’ and
‘cooperates’ with rocks, boulders and thorns in its journey to accomplish its destiny in life’”
(198). Echewa in his novel *I Saw the Catch Fire* as well, questions the absence of mutual
respect and understanding.

The novel challenges certain dominant perspectives, nurtured by colonial rulers and
Igbo men, which undermine the significance of Igbo women in society. It begins with the
first person narrative of Ajuzia, on the eve before his departure to America to get a
university degree, followed by his homecoming from the United States five years later,
when he returns to find Nne-nne (grandmother) in death-bed, and his wife Stella pregnant by
another man. The narrative of the novel is enveloped by Nne-nne’s narration to her
grandson. The intergenerational narration12 opens out a plethora of stories which speak out
the importance of women in a family, in Igbo society, their importance as individuals, which
has been undermined by men. Her narration brings out the domestic wars women fight
against men, challenging certain patriarchal notions, also upholding the predicament of
Stella, whom Ajuzia left alone for five years after marriage, and declined even to write
letters to her.

Unleashing multiple stories about women, bringing out their dilemmas, their
courageous acts, their solidarity (*Ndom*), Nne-nne says: “... A woman is nothing. Yet, a
woman is everything! If a man is high like a tower, a woman is deep like a well! If a man is
a mountain, a woman is the ocean! A woman is like a god! A woman’s crotch is a juju
Das 186

... shrine before which men always kneel and worship. It is their door into this world. ...”
(I Saw 14). Her arsenal of experiences begins with the story of the Aba Women’s War of 1929, where she had been actively involved.13

The term “Women’s War” brings out the importance not only of women protesting against colonial rulers imposing their system of “counting” women—which is considered as disrespect towards them in Igbo culture—but also emphasizes the Igbo custom of, “‘making war,’ an institutionalized form of punishment employed by Igbo women and also known as ‘sitting on a man’” (Allen 61). The notion of “sitting on,” or “making war” is associated with the practice of Igbo women raising voice against a man ill-treating his wife or men defying some rules put forth by women, by assembling at his obi (hut) and singing and dancing, narrating his offence, unless he acknowledges his faults and repents for them.14 This practice is very well highlighted in the novel (discussed later).

The “Women’s War was the collective expression of a collective judgement,” writes Brodzki, and upholds how “the Igbo women identified or associated colonialism with the exercise of illegitimate male power” (212). Therefore, the use of the phrase “sitting on a man” is appropriate to use in this respect. In narrating about her experiences in the War, Nne-nne highlights the protest staged by women, where men have been incompetent to raise their voice. It is the native court clerks along with the white officials against whom Igbo women revolted. Nne-nne’s account is significant in the sense that, she weaves histories to highlight women as active participants in the War. Her narration of the incidents during the War, emphasizing the significance of Ndom, reveals the “personal and communal oral history [which] is framed by the wars women seem eternally to wage against male treachery, truancy, inadequacy, and injustice . . .” (Brodzki 210).
The manner in which the history of colonization is given a new dimension here, by using it to bring into one’s attention, male authority exercised over women, irrespective of him being a colonizer or a colonized, is a very innovative way of rethinking history. Echewa’s manner of portrayal of the War through Nne-nne’s narrative, gives a new dimension to it; for he rethinks history as that of “female incursion into male history making” (Brodzki 212).

Nne-nne narrates the incident which has resulted in the War, to Ajuzia. Chief Njoku Alaribe, at the order of the District Officer, had sent an agent Sam-el to the village of Ikputu-Ala to “count” Igbo women, their children and animals. On approaching a village woman named Akpa-Ego Ozurumba—with the intention to count her family members and animals—she questioned him back: “Has your mother been counted?” (I.Saw 40). It led to an exchange of insults. Sam-el slapped her, and dashed her to the ground, who was then severely injured, more so because she was pregnant. This act of abomination—hitting a pregnant woman—had enraged Ndom. Words were spread around all the villages, and Ndom was prepared to wage a war, their voice throbbing Igbo villages: “British Empire, come and get us! . . . You do not have enough bullets to shoot all of us. You do not have enough prisons to hold all of us. Then after you shoot us, shoot your mother. . . . We are Ndom! Undivided! Umbilical cord tied to umbilical cord. . . .” (sic) (42).

Nne-nne highlights the solidarity of women in protesting against insults and tortures inflicted by native court clerks and indigenous men working under them. The women along with Ugbala, the dibia, gathered round Alaribe’s compound, and started singing and dancing, protesting against the heinous deed committed by Sam-el. Situations were worsened when Ugbala left the site for her home, and was arrested by British officials.
Women from every village came together and assembled near the office of the District Officer, demanding the release of Ugbala, using the weapons of dance and bawdy songs to fight British colonials and indigenous court clerks.

Nne-nne strongly emphasizes the absence of indigenous men in raising voice against such atrocities being committed on women: “‘Women,’ the girl [a village girl] said. ‘Everywhere women. Not many men. The men I saw were standing in groups and shaking their heads at things they did not seem to believe...’” (171). Every woman painted her face with indigo, for it was Ndom in war. The spirit of solidarity was well-expressed in their slogans, and words of protest:

This was not a festival. Not a parade, not a show, but a War.

Who was the enemy?

Government. The White man and his chiefs and his counters...

“Who are you?”

“We are Ndom...”

Ndom is one, uncountable upon uncountable, but still one.

Undivided.” (172)

They raised their voice against taxation, demanded better price for palm kernels and palm oil, claimed for a fall in prices for imported goods, for the abolition of native court clerks, and shouted for the release of Ugbala. They voiced out the “corrupt and oppressive” (176) practices of the native men working for the British officials, and demanded their extirpation.
Nne-nne’s narration asserts the need for women to speak out, against male oppression. It is this “act of speech, of ‘talking back,’” that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our [women’s] movement from object to subject—the liberated voice” (hooks 9). A woman needs to speak, to resist, to question. It is when one speaks, that it “becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless—our beings defined and interpreted by others” (hooks 12).

Echewa highlights, in the novel, how Igbo women had called upon the power of Ebube to fight oppression during the War.16 It was “Ebube Ndom, the awesomeness of the Solidarity of All Womanhood, the Mother and Nurturer of all humankind, kneaded together by Mgbara Ala, the Goddess of the Unity of All Land,” (204) who engaged into action against the British Government and its Igbo officials. They made their way to the prison, freed Ugbala, and more fifteen prisoners. When the warder initially declined to unlock the prison bar and her handcuffs, he was questioned back. Ugbala said: “Child . . . are you going to be a woman or a dog that wags her tail for an unknown master? . . . Why have they put you in charge of me? Did they tell you what I did to merit being brought into this hole? . . .” (205). They proceeded to topple the telegraph posts, and used “sticks, kitchen knives, pounding pestles” (208) to fight the white officer and his soldiers. They revealed their naked buttocks in protest and ridiculed the false authority put up by colonizers, and the indigenous men working under them. There were “[m]ore than one hundred of them [who] died in the barrage that followed” (209). The use of the strategy of body-display to fight suppression not only by the British also by indigenous men, brings out their solidarity as women,
emphasizing their identity as *Ndom*. It is significant to draw one’s attention to Rajender Kaur’s contention in this regard:

The deliberate display of vulgarity also defies the convention of decorum and decency, dictated not just by Igbo patriarchy but patriarchal structures all over the world. Thus when the women blatantly engage in vulgar bodily display . . . they are in fact asserting that they no longer recognize the power of men to elicit conformity. It is for this reason that the British administration, which is entirely male, is totally paralyzed by the sexual insults of the Ndom. (sic) (13)

Nne-nne, in narrating to Ajuzia her experiences during the Aba Women’s War, brings to his notice, “the wars women seem eternally to wage against male treachery, truancy, inadequacy, and injustice . . .” (Brodzki 210). Echewa re-writes histories from a woman’s point of view, making Nne-nne his spokesperson, who overthrows male authoritarianism, and brings out the identity of women, through *Ndom*. One must consider bell hooks’s words in this context. In talking about the necessity for women to speak out, to stop being dominated, hooks writes: “It is important that we speak. What we speak about is more important. It is our responsibility collectively and individually to distinguish between mere speaking that is about self-aggrandizement, exploitation of the exotic ‘other,’ and that coming to voice which is a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle” (18). Nne-nne does not merely narrate a tale of conflict to her grandson; she engages in a process of transmission of stories to the only descendant of her family, Ajuzia, rethinking histories to highlight the significance of women; in the process, also intending to educate him regarding
the need to understand and respect the woman of his life, Stella, without undermining her identity. Her voice is the voice of *Ndom*, and of women’s struggle against patriarchy.

The novel brings out various instances when women have been wronged, and their individual presence undermined; and highlights the manner in which they have spoken back, resisting such attempts to silence them. Ajuzia narrates Nne-nne’s account of the village woman Ahunze, who fought against male domination, injustice and tortures, but was put to death by Akpa-Ego’s husband Ozurumba, two months before the Aba War. It had enraged *Ndom*, and acted as one of the reasons to start the War against male atrocities committed on women. Her story had two versions, “one told by the men, who called her *Nwanyi Enwegh Nluma* (Impossible Wife), and another told by the women, who saw in her gentle manner and tough spirit an example of what was best in women” (*I Saw* 123).

After the death of her husband, Ahunze had been approached by her husband’s brother Ozurumba for marriage, to whom she denied to marry, and was thereafter approached by other men in the village. But when she denied to re-marry, the men in the village started stealing away her possessions and made her stay in the village impossible, after which she was taken by her relatives to her maiden village. It is not the Igbo custom for a woman to deny the advances of all the men, to deny being anyone’s wife. Nne-nne highlights that usually such a woman faces the fate of leading a life among her relatives, without any identity, without any importance in society, highlighting in the process the voicelessness a woman is forced to comply with in a male-dominated society. However, Ahunze rejected the imposition of a way of life determined by men. When Aja-Egbu forced him on her, she resisted “with both hands, fists clenched, and struck him between the eyes with all her might” (159).
Nne-nne brings out her strength of character, her determination to be independent, and lead life according to her aspirations: “Awu-aligh-li, if ever there was one, who showed the truth of the saying that a woman has to say yes to a man for him to get anywhere with her” (124). Defying customs which support male authoritarianism, Ahunze had returned to her late husband’s village Ama-Nkwo, in a house made for her stay by her relatives, and claimed back the piece of land and the palm trees which she herself had earned by trading, and did not belong to her husband. She gradually did very well in cloth trade, people started owing her money and goods to buy clothes, and sometimes to clear their tax. Nne-nne reveals the dexterity with which she carried on her trade, and her independence, a boldness which other women lacked, and admired: “She had the unwomanly boldness to travel to distant markets . . . and return with durable broad cloths and florid European wax prints . . . . She owned cassava farms, which other women frequently planted and weeded for her to work off their debts. She even owned palm trees—something unusual then for a woman” (129).

Through Ahunze’s episode, Nne-nne voices her rebuke against male domination and tortures on women. She emphasizes how Ahunze stood by Akpa-Ego when she was tortured by her husband. Challenging the notion of polygamy practiced by Igbo men, Ahunze questioned the absence of equality among sexes, and therefore, stood in support of Akpa-Ego when she took a lover and turned pregnant. Akpa-Ego’s words highlight the predicament of a childless woman: “Do you think it is wrong for me to look for a better husband? Am I not a woman? Do I not have a woman’s desires?” (142). However, she was beaten mercilessly by her husband Ozurumba, after which, Ndom gathered in Ozurumba’s compound, and using the mode of singing and dancing as a method of protest, demanded his
repentance. The custom of “sitting on a man” is practiced by Igbo women here, to fight male oppression: “They began chanting . . . The women pushed Ozurumba to the ground and spread him out, face up, holding his hands and legs so he could not struggle free. Then they took turns at sitting on him, pulling up their cloths and kirtles to their bare buttocks . . .” (146).

On Ozurumba’s anger at such humiliation suffered by him at the hands of women of the village, a village elder Aja-Egbu revealed to him the fact that: it is Ndom, it is women’s solidarity, which challenges male atrocities, and exercises the power of women to demand justice. His words bring out the supremacist and dominating tendency of men: “. . . a person restrains himself, even if he is angered. A woman’s head is now equal to a man’s head. If you are beating your wife, something you are entitled to, and land a blow on the wrong spot and she collapses and dies, it is your head to pay for it” (emphasis added) (150). Echewa underlines the lack of a space for mutual respect. The episode ended with Ozurumba murdering Ahunze, and thereafter committing suicide. However, Ndom unleashed their might in protest.

Nne-nne’s narration of the story of Ahunze is not a simple rumination of an incident, but is a rethinking of a woman’s life. It is a story of power, the power of women to resist, to confront, thereby challenging the very idea to dominate. In this context, hooks’s contentions are important to consider. She draws one’s attention to the fact that:

The act of speaking is a way women come to power, telling our stories, sharing history . . . Breaking through long silences, many women gave voice for the first time to personal sorrow and anguish, rage, bitterness, and even
deep hatred. This speech was a part of women’s struggle to resist the silence imposed by male domination. It was an act of resistance. And it was threatening. While it was speech that enabled women to rebel and resist . . .

The next stage would have been the confrontation between women and men, the sharing of this new and radical speech: women speaking to men in a liberated voice. . . . [as is very well witnessed in Nne-nne speaking to Ajuzia]. (129)

Nne-nne, in narrating to Ajuzia, brings out “this new and radical speech,” speaking to him “in a liberated voice,” and sharing with him the idea of according respect to women, shunning any attempt to dominate; and it is Ndom, who, in confronting men, breaks the silence and voicelessness women are subjected to.

The tendency to dominate is not specific to men. I would like to argue that, in several instances, women tend to dominate and internalize the patriarchal authoritarian frame of mind, to implement restrictions on fellow-women themselves. One needs to fight the propensity to dominate, to decline an attempt to understand each other, being judgmental; and respect individual “Soliloquies.” hooks points out that:

To understand domination, we must understand that our capacity as women and men to be either dominated or dominating is a point of connection, of commonality. . . . women who are ourselves exploited, victimized, are dominating children. It is necessary for us to remember, as we think critically about domination, that we all have the capacity to act in ways that oppress, dominate, wound . . . It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential
 oppressor within that we must resist—the potential victim within that we
must rescue—otherwise we cannot hope for an end to domination, for
liberation. (20-21)

Echewa focuses on the episode of Nwanyi-Nma, who, after getting married and being the
mother of two children, left them to choose being a prostitute. He presents two conflicting
views here, through Nne-nne’s narration. Where Nne-nne and the village women considered
Nwanyi-Nma to bring shame on all her fellow women, Nwanyi-Nma had a different
perspective to taking up the role of a prostitute: giving priority to her desires, and to her
choice of leading life. Nwanyi-Nma also denied to submit to the practice of circumcision,
but the novel uncovers her forced circumcision. There is a want of understanding of each
other’s view-points in the encounter among them, leading to a tendency to dominate, to
force her in conforming to Igbo cultural norms.

Her confrontation with her mother and mother-in-law, unleashes a series of counter-
arguments in support of taking up the role of a prostitute. On questioning her decision and
accusing her, she argued that: “. . . your daughter is a big businesswoman in the township
. . . she now has enough money to come home in a few weeks to repay her husband every
broken manila that he paid on her account. . . .” (60). Taking up the name Oyoyo, she talked
about her perspective, and her decision to join prostitution; as Nne-nne narrates:

Undaunted by her consternation, Oyoyo continued to talk about her
prostitution as if she were a dibia, an exalted high priestess, and her body a
fetish that men paid a high price to come and consult. In the village, she said,
did not women brag about how much they cost their husbands in bride price?
Was this not better than *tukwuo-lia* and *utu-ghara*, which the women of the village sometimes engaged in? Besides, no one ever beat her; no one gave her much humbug. The men paid gladly. More than gladly, they paid eagerly.

... (61)

Echewa brings in the perspectives of her mother and mother-in-law too, in order to highlight the different manner of looking at certain Igbo practices: "Was womanhood for sale?... Was the bride price a purchase price for something? When a wife favored her husband with her body, was there a price for the favor?..." (61-62).

Oyoyo was forcibly taken by the women from Agalaba Uzo to the village, and thereafter, she was taken to her mother's home, with the hope that she can be brought up again, and "offer her anew to her husband;" (69) and thereafter, they come up with the decision to re-circumcise her. Kaur highlights the fact that: "... the forced clitoridectomy of Oyoyo is definitely expressive of the determined efforts of her community to curtail and control her independence" (10). She questions the imposition of a custom on a woman against her consent, and upholds the idea that: "While Ugbala and the other women accept clitoridectomy as a rule of life, women like Oyoyo, who have developed an alienated consciousness because of the influence of the western perspective brought by the British, see it as repressive" (10). Four days after her circumcision by Ugbala, Oyoyo had escaped back to Agalaba Uzo, and had filed complaint against Ugbala, charging her of "[a]ttended homicide" (72). After Ugbala's escape, Ekweredi (Oyoyo's mother-in-law) and Orianu (her mother) was arrested. When Oyoyo's husband attempted to kill her with a cutlass, he was arrested and punished according to the colonial law.
By narrating the episode of Oyoyo which happened a few months before the War, Echewa intends to draw one's attention to another aspect here: The enforced norms of Victorian England on Igbo society had resulted in male domination, and an invisibility of Igbo women in farming and trading, restricting them to home. Nne-nne highlights how the imposition of the colonial rule and the White ways of life had made changes in Igbo tradition and customs, whereby women embraced prostitution to earn money, and got their mothers and mother-in-laws arrested. The intrusion of colonizers had led to a disruption of the traditional Igbo ways of life when women earned alongside men by farming, and were not restricted to household works only.

Also, Allen has laid emphasis on how women had been victims at the hands of native Chiefs: “Women suffered particularly under the arbitrary rule of Warrant Chiefs, who reportedly took women to marry without allowing them the customary right to refuse a particular suitor. They also helped themselves to the women’s agricultural produce and domestic animals” (71). Colonialism had resulted in the loss of power and respect women had enjoyed in their traditional pre-colonial ways of living. Feeling thwarted and undermined, women therefore protested and revolted in the Aba Women’s War in 1929. The Oyoyo episode very well brings out this social condition of Igbo society. Kaur calls one’s attention to her argument that:

Oyoyo’s prostitution represents a greater exploitation of women by the emerging colonial and more aggressively patriarchal economy which deprives women of the freedom and privileges they enjoyed under the traditional precolonial social and economic order. In this context it is interesting to note that one of the primary reasons of the women’s war of
1929 that the novel dramatizes was that the women felt they were losing the special powers and respect they had always enjoyed from the community in the new socio-economic order of colonialism. . . . (11)

Nne-nne upholds the degrading condition of Igbo society after the invasion of colonizers, emphasizing the gradual loss of traditional values among the younger generation, leading to a deplorable condition of women. Her narration to Ajuzia also includes Ajuzia himself under her lens of criticizing patriarchy. She questions his chauvinistic treatment of Stella, when he comes back from the United States after five years, and reveals to him the predicament of a woman to spend five years after marriage without a husband.

In the second part of the novel, Echewa brings forth the wars which Stella continually need to fight against Ajuzia, which also upholds the struggles waged by Stella's mother as well as Nne-nne. Beautifully naming the chapters in this part of the novel, as "Stella's Wars," "Civil and Domestic Wars," "Modern Women and Modern Wars," and "Woman Wins," the author very well highlights the struggles and resistance put up by women in Nigeria at the brink of independence, in 1959. Ajuzia recalls his relationship with Stella before leaving for the United States; and Echewa highlights how Stella has voiced a strong protest, when he has denied to marry her after she has been pregnant:

"I am not ready for marriage, Stella!" [Ajuzia]

She bolted to her feet."What are you ready for? Tell me, what are you ready for? I am not ready for it, either. I just took School Cert three months ago and have not received the results. But here I am pregnant, thanks to you."
If I had come here this evening and nothing was wrong, you would have me in your bed by now.” (229)

Ajuzia emphasizes that it has been Nne-nne who has handled the situation, and has understood Stella as well as him, as well as reminded him of his duty to stand by Stella:

“Nne-nne tempered my feelings, enlarged the perspective from which I had been looking at things, so that when I left her that afternoon, I saw possibilities I had not seen before” (230).

However, even after their marriage and the birth of their daughter W’Orima, Ajuzia initially fails to understand the predicament of a woman when her husband leaves her for five years to pursue studies abroad. Although he promises Stella to make arrangements for her to come over after a year, to the United States, Stella brings out the incomprehensibility of a man to comprehend a woman’s dilemmas: “Man come and man go. As you and I sit here and now, I believe you mean everything you say, but what about tomorrow? . . .” (251).

Despite Ajuzia’s initial unwillingness to acknowledge Stella’s grief, he does open up a space for mutual understanding. He realizes the grief Stella suffers, the grief of a woman, recalling Nne-nne’s narration of the Aba War. He discerns the bindings which are forced on a woman, disguised under the façade of her responsibility as a mother, as a wife; while it is a man who is always free to leave, to shun his responsibilities:

. . . The man was always free to come and go as he chose, and nothing limited him except his own willingness to stay. A woman did not have the same choices. A woman never left. Could I imagine, for example, that she, Stella, would leave me and W’Orima while she went overseas? No, if parenthood was a funeral, then a man was only a guest mourner. . . . If grief came in a
trough, a man took as much of it as would adhere to a dipstick; the woman took the whole trough. (256)

However, during his stay in the United States, he declines to write letters regularly, and when he returns after five years to find Stella pregnant, he refuses to accept her as his wife anymore.

It is through the words of Nne-nne and Stella’s mother, that the author highlights the perspectives of women, challenging the tendency of a man to question women’s activities without directing the lens of criticism to those of his own. The novel challenges the authoritarian male discourse, and brings to light the discourse of women who are always subjected to endure the circumstances forced on them, as is found in Nne-nne’s words to Ajuzia:

“... Together we all wondered what had become of you, why you did not make a way for her [Stella] to join you, as you had promised... Did you forget her? Did you forget all of us...”

“... for five years a young woman like her endured life without a husband. The child she was nursing when you left home became weaned... If her affection for you was not deep, she would have been long gone by now.”

(274)

On Ajuzia’s questioning of her fidelity, Nne-nne points out how men are entitled to enter into relationship with many women, but the same fails to happen for women. Stella’s mother, too, at an earlier point in the novel, challenges the practice of polygamy among Igbo men, and denies to accept her husband’s marrying of three wives. Nne-nne questions
Ajuzia back: "... You ... began a new study that was supposed to last another three or four years. Was she [Stella] supposed to wait for you those nine years? And spend all her youth waiting? ..." (276). The novel criticizes Ajuzia's male chauvinistic attitude.

In a moment of conversation with Stella's mother, when he accuses Stella for victimizing him, she retorts: "... Who victimized you? Tell me, how have you been victimized? I am trying to show you how you have made a mess of everything, and you are telling me about being a victim" (293). She questions his inability to perform the duties a husband is entitled to do, towards his wife, and blames him for failing to take up the responsibility of his wife and daughter. When Ajuzia cross-questions her if she justifies Stella's pregnancy, she speaks up against the sham veil of authority which a man seems to put up, claiming his innocence, and inflicting blame on his wife: "... what she did was not the only wrong thing that has been done. I cannot sit here and indulge your wounded innocence or discuss with you how much Stella has offended you and therefore how angry you have a right to be. No. ..." (297).

Stella's attempted suicide leading to her loss of pregnancy, and Nne-nne's words of wisdom before ending her last breath, imbibe within him a deeper sense of realization, an understanding of both his and Stella's perspectives, her sufferings, and her dilemmas, her "Soliloquies." Stella highlights the fact that his taking up a lover in the United States would never have been a trouble, since "it is different for a man to have a woman on the side than it is for a woman to have man," (300) bringing out the harsh truth a woman is confronted with in life. In fact, the novel reveals that Ajuzia had taken up a woman during his stay in the United States, pointing out the patriarchal order of society where a woman needs to be answerable for every deed of hers while a man is never questioned.
Later, when Ajuzia decides to take Stella and W’Orima with him and go back to America to complete his studies, Stella declines to leave. She speaks to him of Nne-nne, of her stories, of their root in their native place, denying to abandon them, denying to forget the histories which have been weaved together by Nne-nne:

... I feel a part of the history of your family because Nne-nne filled me full of it, and made me a member of it, and showed me where W’Orima and I were joined to it... I cannot simply stumble along behind you... If America is so important to you that you must return there now at all costs, then that is your choice. So far as I am concerned, America can wait...

(318)

Her decision to stay back in order to embrace her responsibilities towards her family, her village, is reminiscent to the spirit of Nne-nne who never left the village. She continues to fight the wars Nne-nne and *Ndom* has fought against domination and patriarchy, also “persuading her husband Aju, not to turn an ethnographic gaze upon his own culture” (Kaur 17).

Echewa encourages the necessity to understand each other, and challenges the patriarchal ways of framing social structures, which leads to the domination of women. Through Nne-nne’s intergenerational transmission, this novel upholds a space where histories are transmitted to the next generation not only with an aim to preserve oral stories but also with an intention to bring out women’s stories, rethinking histories from women’s perspectives. Brodzki comments that: “Female ingenuity, courage, autonomy, and survival
in the face of male impotence and unreliability are the dominant strands of this particular discourse” (210).

This novel, in bringing out varied perspectives of women, like those of Nne-nne, Akpa-Ego, Ahunze, Oyoyo, Stella, and Stella’s mother, portrays female resistance to patriarchal structures, engaging in continual wars against the very idea to oppress, the tendency to curb women’s power and freedom, and the denial to comprehend a woman’s predicament and dilemmas. Echewa questions the scarcity of mutual dialogue. It is significant to remember that, as hooks points out: “. . . dialogue can only emerge if there is awareness that women and men must consciously alter the way we talk to and about one another so that we do not perpetuate and reinforce male domination. . . .” (131).
Notes


2 See Stratton, 173.

3 Minh-ha talks about the fabrication of a woman's identity, and brings out how a woman is reduced to a "body" severing her ability to create, to write: "... Women began to be spoken of as if they were wombs on two feet when the fetus was described as a citizen, the womb was declared state property, legislation was passed to control it, and midwifery was kept under continual medical supervision—in other words, when women were denied the right to create. Or not to create. With their bodies" (37).

4 See Selden, 125-153.

5 See Ukpokolo, "Gender, Symbols" 175.

6 John McLeod, in talking about postcolonial feminist criticism, writes that:

Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford have used the phrase 'a double colonisation' to refer to the ways in which women have *simultaneously* experienced the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy. ... the phrase 'a double colonisation' refers to the fact that women are twice colonized—by colonialist realities and representations, and by patriarchal ones too. (175)

7 Ania Loomba highlights the discourse created by patriarchal male members of society:

"The nation as a mother protected her son from colonial ravages, but was also herself ravaged by colonialism and in need of her son's protection. ... Thus the image of nation as mother both marshals and undercuts female power" (182).
The "new" woman was completely opposite to the "common" woman depicted in nineteenth-century literature as "lower-class female characters" (Partha Chatterjee, The Nation 127). He also highlights how nationalism claimed to reform such debased condition of women. One finds that:

... the new woman of the nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the Westernized women of the wealthy parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection, as well as the common women of the lower classes. Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman's newly acquired freedom. ... (127)

The "discourse of anti-colonial nationalism—was in its core a male discourse ..." (136). Writing about the celebrated actress Binodini, Chatterjee reveals the fact that "the story of nationalist emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal" (154).

9 "Ofo ... an instrument of traditional peacebuilding among the Nanka Igbo, is made of a stick or pieces of sticks of Detarium senegalense tree tied together. ... The ofo stick or staff is employed in serious discussions and in taking serious family or community decisions that are especially intended to be binding on every member of the family or community. Thus, it becomes a seal to an agreement when it is used to invoke the spirit of the ancestors and the Earth goddess. This is called the isu ofo mechanism" (Ukpokolo 176).

10 See Oyewumi, "Conceptualizing Gender."


12 See Brodzki, 209-211.

13 The historical backdrop of Aba Women's War has been mentioned, in brief, in the previous chapter. Chapter five takes a look at the war from the perspective of challenging Western anthropology, questioning the objectifying gaze of the White woman anthropologist Elizabeth Ashby-Jones. This chapter—chapter six—upholds the power of Ndum to bring about a war upon the British colonials, at the same time highlighting the invisibility of men in the war, their incapability to raise voice
against taxation, against the unjust arrests by colonial rulers. The Aba War signifies women's protests, not only against the British but also against the inefficiency of Igbo men.

14 See Allen, 61-62.

15 Akpa-Ego was a widow, whose husband had hanged himself, being beaten by *Ndom* for torturing her; and when Sam-el hit her, *Ndom* rose once again to fight against such cruelty towards women.

16 Echewa does not give the meaning of the Igbo word *Ebube* in the glossary at the end of the novel. The spirit and power associated with the word remains untranslatable. He mentions in the novel the significance of *Ebube* in Igbo cosmology:

*Ebube*, the aura of power, the all-enshrouding force you feel around the shrine of a powerful juju . . .

The power of a curse put on you by the old clay-pot trader, whom you caused to stumble and break all her pots, a curse so powerful and unshakable that it followed you everywhere, in every incarnation, and you could not hide from it . . . unless you never ever ate anything cooked in a pot . . .

A leopard in a crouch, about to leap on a prey, a python about to strike. The power to transfix and paralyze prey with a powerful stare—all power of body and spirit singularly focused on the piercing point of the eyes, while the victim stands helpless and hopeless, knowing that all thought of hope is futile. (197)

17 Echewa writes in the novel: "Custom allowed her [Ahunze] to choose whom she pleased. What custom did not allow her, however, was the choice of emerging from the mourning house and declaring that she did not wish to e anyone's wife. Anyone at all" (124).

18 At one such incident, when Akpa-Ego was beaten for not being able to bear a child, Ahunze questioned the patriarchal tendency to consider a woman guilty for every reason, and vehemently rebuked her for blaming her own self: " . . . there may be more than one reason for a bad haircut: The
Das 207

barber may not know what he is doing, or maybe his razor is not sharp. Ozurumba's first wife never had a baby for him either, but after she left him she had a houseful of children for her next husband;” (135) and in a moment of emotion, she revealed the grief of her life, of being childless, for she had been a victim of torture at the hands of her husband during pregnancy.

19 Echewa gives the meaning of these two practices, in the glossary of the novel:

“Tukwuo-lia, uu gbara—A woman who goes to live with a man when all the marriage customs have not been fulfilled is enslaved or mortgaged to a penis” (324).

20 See Allen, 80.

21 See Echewa 242-243.
Works Cited


