

# Contextualizing Female Identifications and the Politics of Otherness in Black Female Writings

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## Conceptual Clarifications

*Perhaps ... 'woman is not a determinable identity. Perhaps woman is not something which announces itself from a distance, at a distance from some other thing ... Perhaps woman – a non-identity, non-figure, a simulacrum – a distance's very chasm, the out-distancing of distance, the interval's cadence, distance itself (Derrida 49).*

Jaques Derrida, the Algerian-born French post-structuralist, in the above, delineates categories that woman, as an entity or otherwise, can be studied. In spite of post-structuralism's emphasis on the contingent and discursive nature of all identities (Randall 116), and the jettisoning of female essentialism, where essentialism expounds the view that objects have some attributes that are necessary to their identity (Cartwright 620), this paper is premised on the notion that the category of woman is neither a universal nor a generic entity. To argue otherwise would present the category of woman as lacking verisimilitude.

The complexity of the category of woman makes it compelling to restrict the focus of this research to black women. This is because the experiences of black women are similar in different cultures, as captured by Janie's Grandma in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as she tries to counsel her granddaughter, Janie, on essential life values that the latter requires as a young girl growing in the racist black community in the American South. Deploying the southern African-American dialect, she states:

... de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tot it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you ... (14).

The image of black womanhood that Janie's Grandma poses above is common to black women, and reinforces the fact of the consanguinity of black women the world over.

The global human historiography classifies people into diverse groups according to specific parameters, which include physical attributes, metaphysical as well as socio-politico-economic variables. These factors crystallize into identifications for different persons regardless of gender in all cultures. The identifications determine the treatment and reactions that the persons are accorded in the private and public spheres of life. Correspondingly, there are socio-politico-economic mechanisms that are engrained in the cultural fabrics of all societies to engender the identification of both male and female. But Adrienne Rich highlights that “Patriarchal monotheism ... stripped the universe of female divinity, and permitted women to be sanctified, as if by an unholy irony, only and exclusively as mother ... or as the daughter of a divine father. She becomes the property of the husband-

father...” (119). This is the black female configuration on which this paper is based.

This study is concerned with the reactions of black women to their identifications in the selected novels, the modalities that the women evolve and deploy to deal with the repercussions of the identifications, especially in situations where the women deteriorate to being classified as the “Other”. The selected novels are Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*. This paper uses the qualitative research method to analyse the black woman's efforts at managing the matrix of exclusivity at both the micro and macro levels of operations. It also addresses the different challenges of hegemonic codification and recodification of black womanhood, which often generate identifications of otherness as depicted in the selected novels for this study. Self stands in opposition to “Other”, and Udentia Udentia contends that “Self... is open to every single Other, and ... [has] to 'un-close' the sphericity of thought contained within Self in awareness of those 'overlapping cultural territories and interstices' that must necessarily be overcome ... but never to be made permanent nor normativized in the signifying chain of narration (71). Here in lies the connection between identification and otherness.

Identity is a complex phenomenon and the subject of the unconscious. Rosi Braidotti asserts that it is influenced by such factors as class, race, age and sexual choices. Specifically, she argues that:

... the self is an entity endowed with identity. ... A difference within each entity is a way of expressing this condition [of self-representation]. Identity ... is a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to the 'other'; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process. ... Identity is made of successive identifications, that is ... unconscious internalized images that escape rational control (48).

Essentially, the usual derogatory identification of black womanhood as captured in the novels selected for this study is a well-orchestrated pattern designed, sustained and controlled by the eponymous patriarchal principle which underlies and determines much of the relational processes between the two genders at all levels of functioning. **Patricia Collins notes identity to be a play of multiple, fractured aspects of the self; it is relational, in that it requires a bond to be “other”; it is retrospective, in that it is fixed through memories and recollections, in a genealogical process ... identity is made of successive identifications, that is ... unconscious internalized images that escape rational control” (417-418).** Within this context, Safoura Salami-Boukari raises several probing questions that are significant to this study. They include:

What place do they [black women] occupy in both the socio-economic and political arena from the post-colonial/independence to the present? What economic strategies do they develop to struggle, resist and survive in a male-dominated environment where gender and other intersecting discriminations are perceived as acceptable? What kinds of grassroots projects are likely to work to boost women's environment? ... (205)

By implication, the black woman is bereft of power *ab initio* in her relational experience with the black man, and while the former is constantly identified by the stereotypes of docility, passivity and diffidence, the latter is vocal, confident and powerful. This is the perspective that Helene Cixous describes as “dual hierarchized opposition” (287),

a structure in which man is ahead of woman, assumed to be higher than and superior to her. Cixous' "Sorties" demonstrates this notion in the equation:

Man  
Woman (287)

Since the phenomenon called woman is fixed, her tendencies, are already predictable, capabilities are restricted, potentialities are limited, Simone de Beauvoir, a "First Wave" feminist theorist in her classic treatise, *The Second Sex*, "one is not born woman, but rather becomes woman (267), and since men define women, women are a "second" sex. From the reality that it is impermissible for woman to evolve her own destiny, she is relegated to the description of "Other" in relation to man. This constitutes the thrust of this study, which is referred to as "the Politics of Otherness". Cixous' thesis holds that "woman is always on the side of passivity. Every time the question comes up; when we examine kinship structures; whenever a family model is brought into play; ... as soon as the ontological question is raised; as soon as you ask yourself what is meant by the question 'What is it?'; as soon as there is a will to say something ... and you are led right back – to the father. You can even fail to notice that there's no place at all for women in the operation! In the extreme the world of 'being' can function to the exclusion of the mother. No need for the mother. Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist" (264). Cixous here explains the mindset that makes Obierika, the titled man and Okonkwo's friend in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, to host the marriage of his daughter, Akueke, without the appearance of his wife, Akueke's mother. His family is represented by his two elder brothers, and Maduka his sixteen-year old son, while Akueke's suitor is accompanied by his father and uncle. None of the parties has a female member, and Akueke's mother is invited to the ceremony only after negotiations for and payment of the bride price are completed. Her role is to serve food to the men. Obierika sends Maduka "Go and tell Akueke's mother that we have finished" (73). The omniscient narrator reveals that "almost immediately the women came in with bowls of foo-foo. Obierika's second wife followed with a pot of soup ..." (73).

In *The Joys of Motherhood* Buchi Emecheta portrays Nnu Ego in her first marriage to Amatokwu, in which she, unfortunately, has no children. Since the woman is always the guilty party in a childless marriage, Nnu Ego assumes that she is the problem, she personalizes the misfortune and condemns herself to a life of misery. Shortly afterwards, Amatokwu's family members find him a new wife, and he relegates Nnu Ego from the main house "to a nearby hut kept for older wives ..." (32). Though he buoys her up with the fact that despite her inability to bear children (sons), she can at least help harvest yams (33), it becomes inevitable for Nnu Ego to leave the marriage.

Nnu Ego's father, Nwokocha Agbadi collects Nnu Ego from Amatokwu's house after her experiences of severe battery from Amatokwu. Her father ensures that she recovers physically and emotionally, and then arranges for her to be married to Nnaife Owulum who "is in a white man's employ in a place called Lagos. They say any fool can be rich in such places (37). In all of Agbadi's concern for his daughter's welfare, there is no evidence that he considers the need to work any woman, even though Ona, Nnu Ego's mother had dies, yet he has other wives and female family members. The invisibility of the black woman depicted in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is a fundamental identification that premises several derogatory experiences of women, especially her relegation from the scheme of events, many of which actually concern her directly. This exclusivity, which Simone de Beauvoir describes as "otherness" is what black women constantly deal with in relational contexts with their men at all levels in private and public domains.

### **Otherness in the Selected Texts**

It is interesting to imagine that “otherness” manifests among black women across the world. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford's epic account of her life to her friend, Pheoby Watson, she reveals her quest for a true identity and self-definition. That quest compels her into three marriages. Light-skinned, long, rich haired, Janie, who never knew her father, and her mother left her for the grandmother, Nanny, who raised her. Nanny's wish is to get the sixteen-year old Janie to marry a man who is financially secure and emotionally stable. She ignores Janie's objections, and marries her off to the middle-aged farmer, Logan Killiks, who regards and treats her like a child and expects her to be humble, and accord him total obedience always. This expectation reinforces the identification of the typical black woman in Africa and the diaspora: the unthinking, mentally infantile entity that always needs the man to make her complete and authentic.

Janie's defiant spirit and quest for freedom make her leave Logan for the handsome, ambitious and enterprising Joe Starks who, like Logan, does not allow Janie to argue with him or express her opinion in matters or appear in public. He makes efforts to control her, and determine what she should do, and this is what Patricia Collins refers to in her assertion that “black men who feel that they cannot be men unless they are in charge can be highly threatened by assertive Black women, especially those in their own households” (157). He dies, and Janie marries Tea Cake who is younger than her. It is in her relationship with Tea Cake that she most manifests her potential because Tea Cake allows her to be her true self, express herself, leave her thick dark hair to flow down her back, sit on the porch and interact with guests. Unfortunately, in a swift turn of events, Tea Cake contracts rabies, and in a bout of lunacy, shoots at Janie, and then Janie is compelled to kill him to save her life.

The dilemma of identifications is also portrayed in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point zero*, which features Firdaus in pursuit of an identity that would not place her in the class of the “other”. In the novel, Firdaus suffers exclusivity within the family where her mother preserves any available food for the father, while the children go to bed hungry. Emerging from the family where the girl child is commodified is Firdaus' burden from when she grows under her under uncle in Cairo after the death of her parents. Her uncle sexually abuses her Justas Mohammadian had earlier done. As Firdaus is curious and desirous of education as her uncle who is schooling in El Azhar, Cairo, he discloses to her that formal education is only for men. In her efforts to evolve an identification for herself, she recounts:

... wondering about myself, as the questions went round in my mind.  
Who was I? Who was my father? Was I going to spend my life sweeping  
the dung out from under the animals, carrying manure on my head,  
kneading dough, and baking bread? (16)

These are the basic categories of Firdaus' identification. She seems not to accept these identifications: the centripetal force, represented by the patriarchal constructs around Firdaus, acts antithetically to the centrifugal force from within her, which seeks to give her a credible identification. She narrates:

Every time I tried to walk, I fell. A force seemed to push me from behind, so I fell forwards, or a weight from in front seemed to lean on me so that I fell backwards. It was something like a pressure of air wanting to crush me; something like the pull of the earth trying to suck me down into the depths. And in the midst of it all there I was, struggling, straining my arms and legs in an attempt to stand up. But I kept falling, buffeted by the contradictory forces that kept pulling me in different directions (17).

The above reveals Firdaus' realities, which also define who she is as she constantly wrestles to get a desirable identification for herself.

In Cairo, her uncle's wife catches the bug of female commodification as she suggests that her uncle, Sheikh Mahmoud, is a virtuous man, with a big pension and no children, whose wife dies the previous year. If he marries Firdaus she will have a good life with him, and he can find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness. Firdaus has grown ... and must be married. It is risky for her to continue without a husband ... An old but reliable man is surely better than a young man who treats her in a humiliating way, or beats her (36). Firdaus is made to marry the Sheikh, who is over sixty years old. Unfortunately, he sees her as wasteful, an identification that actually controverts Firdaus' frugal disposition that emerged from her intensely impoverished background. This profligate identity earns her some reprimands, and then beatings, all of which she feels are unwarranted.

Firdaus first attempt to quit the marriage fails because as she returns to her uncle's house, she is promptly taken back to the Sheikh. The next time she leaves, she chooses to avoid her uncle, but walks aimlessly till she meets Bayoumi, a coffee-shop operator, who offers her accommodation, and treats her with dignity. Bayoumi desires her to keep the apartment and cook for both of them. Rather, Firdaus seeks to improve herself and plan for her future, as she states: "I have a secondary school certificate, and I want to work. But I must work. I can't carry on like this ... I cannot continue to live in your house... You promised I'd stay only until you found me a job. ... You're busy all day in the coffee-house, and you haven't even tried to find me a job. I'm going out now to look for one" (49).

By making a case for herself, Firdaus seems to mortify Bayoumi who takes to locking Firdaus into the apartment when he goes out, verbal abuse as well as rape. He jumps at Firdaus and slaps her severely on the face, saying "... you street walker, you low woman" (49). Firdaus describes the impact of the slap:

... it was the heaviest slap I had ever received on my face. My head swayed first to one side, then to the other. The walls and the floor seemed to shift violently. I held my head in my hands until they grew still again ... (49).

Bayoumi's desire to keep Firdaus under his control affirms Collins' opinion that Black men's essential selection to protect Black women can become an ideology of Black masculinity "in such a way that Black manhood became dependent on Black women's willingness to accept protection. Within this version of masculinity, a slippery slope emerges between *protecting* Black women and *controlling* them. This control is often masked, all in defense of widespread beliefs that Black man must be in charge in order to regain their lost manhood" (157)

She eventually leaves Bayoumi and meets Sherifa Salah el Dine who operates a brothel, and introduces Firdaus to self-consciousness and prostitution. For her, Firdaus is a pawn from which she must generate profit. She enlightens Firdaus:

A man does not know a woman's value. ... She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realize what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand (55).

Sherifa fixes the price for each of Firdaus' sex meetings, and Firdaus explains how she never leaves the bedroom. She stays all day and night "on the bed, crucified and every



hour a man would come in ...” (57). Firdaus realizes that she is the loser in the venture that she has with Sherifa, who is the swindler. She escapes from her.

Essentially, Firdaus is regarded as a sex object, and especially after she leaves Sherifa for a destination she neither has nor knows, she meets with the vicissitudes of patriarchal structures that tweak her mind and re-calibrates her critique of herself to help her define who she is. She first encounters a policeman who proposes to take her to his house and then pay her. But Firdaus neither has a sense of self-worth nor the ability to peg a valuation on her self. Incidentally, the policeman suspects that she is perfidious, and so threatens her:

... I'll take you off to the police station. ... You're a prostitute, and it's my duty to arrest you, ... To clean up the country, and protect respectable families from the likes of you. But I don't want to use force. Perhaps we can agree quietly without a fuss. I'll give you a pound: a whole pound ... (62).

Firdaus objects to all his offers, but he forces her down, rapes her, and yet fails to pay her: “What are you waiting for? I have no money on me tonight. I'll give you money the next time” (62).

Furthermore, Firdaus meets Di'aa, a journalist, who tries to strike up a relationship with her, but prefers to talk with her. Di'aa discloses to her that she is “not respectable” (70), and this makes a remarkable impression on Firdaus, and engages her tremendously, and she begins to evaluate herself: “One phrase, one small phrase composed of two words threw a glaring light on the whole of my life, and made me see it as it really was ... I was not a respectable woman” (72). This identification is repugnant to Firdaus, and she tries to expunge it by vigorously searching for, and finding a job with a big industrial company. As an employee, Firdaus meets Ibrahim, a senior staff of the company. They share love and lots of fond sentiments. It is with Ibrahim that she surmounts the machination of silence that had all the while kept her inexpressive and easily defrauded in previous relationships. But he jilts her, and gets engaged to the daughter of the chairman of the company. Firdaus is so disappointed and devastated that she quits the job, and goes back into prostitution. In her consternation, she is agitated by what Ann Crittenden describes as “a conspiracy of silence” (28), which seems to engulf everyone, and make female victimization and exclusivity a norm in modern society.

While still searching for an identification that indicates inclusivity, Firdaus meets an Arab prince to whom she values herself as high as 3,000 piastre, which he pays in full. But in a quick reversal, Firdaus tears up the money, as a rebellion against all forms of domination, defective identification, everything that portrays her as an “Other”, the veil and all forms of covering, etc, and she states: “I am not a prostitute. But right from my early days my father, my uncle, my husband, all of them, taught me to grow up as a prostitute” (99).

Her efforts to assume a credible identification generates an intense dissent from the ideas of Marzouk, the pimp, who insists on managing her so as to protect her. She highlights: “I thought I had escaped from me, but the man who came this time practiced a well-known male profession. He was a pimp ... and insisted on sharing in my earnings (92). Marzouk maintains that “every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps, and from the police ... There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself” (92). Firdaus ends up stabbing Marzouk to death as a way of eliminating all demoralizing, dispiriting and depressing elements around her, which operate in disparate ways from her ideals and sense

of self. According to Barbara Omolade, to protect black women has been “the most significant measure of black manhood and the central aspect of black male patriarchy” (13).

In Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*, the criterion that determines female identification within the family and the society is captured by Amaka's mother in:

What is important is not marriage as such, but children, being able to have children, being a mother. A marriage is no marriage without children. Have your children, be able to look after them, and you will be respected (8).

In consequence, it is a tragic experience as Amaka has no children in the six years of her marriage to Obiora. Obiora's siblings all have children. His mother is impatient with Amaka, and she places the whole burden of childlessness in her son's marriage on Amaka. This identification generates grave impact on and reaction to Amaka. It compels her to visit many doctors and herbalists, but the solution remains elusive. Obiora's mother gets him to marry another woman with whom he has two sons: “My son has two sons and tomorrow the mother ... will come and live in this house with her sons. We have performed all the ceremonies, and she is coming ...” (14). She disbelieves and derides Amaka's claim of seeking medical attention for her childlessness. Being childless inscribes on Amaka the identification of a retrograde, as Obiora's mother accuses her of being Obiora's setback, and the cause of his seeming stagnation and creeping progress:

The next thing I want to tell you is that you have done nothing towards the advancement of my son since you married him six years ago. ... My son has not started building a house yet, nor has he done anything for his age-grade in this town (15).

Obiora's mother is unaware that it was Amaka who bought the car that Obiora drives, but she had asked him not to disclose that to anyone. Unfortunately, Obiora, who, previously, was grateful to Amaka for all her resourcefulness, creativity, and support for him, turns around and joins his mother in unleashing verbal and physical assaults on her, and it becomes inevitable that she quits the marriage. However, prior to her leaving the marriage, she negates the identification of the weak, unthinking, pleasure-post: during an incident of Obiora's violent ire, Amaka runs into the toilet to escape the consequences of his furor. He verbally abuses her, pours on her enormous vituperation as against the adorable and kind-hearted wife to whom he owed a lot of appreciation hitherto. He yells at her over the locked toilet door: “Open the door, you whore, you good-for-nothing woman, you prostitute. ... I am going to kill you today and take your corpse to your mother and nobody will ask questions ... I will tear you to pieces” (28-29).

Significantly, the cross-cultural and trans-historical appraisal above of the disparate forms of female identification in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, and Nwapa's *One is Enough* reveal the matrix of de Beauvoir's epistemology of “otherness” that contemporary black women are still dealing with in the family and social contexts. The schismatizing views of Hurston's Janie and Logan and Jody, El Saadawi's Firdaus and all the men she encounters, as well as Nwapa's Amaka and Obiora, and her mother, and her sister and Father Mclaid, demonstrate the three women's efforts to subvert the systems that thrust on them identifications of otherness, that deprives them of Self and the attributes of credible personalities. Rather, it makes them vulnerable, with wounded minds. Each of the women is a site for exploitation by the system, which constitutes and is controlled by men: thus, the incidents of abuse, deprivation, oppression and manipulation symbolize a metaphorical rape of the soul of the woman, with a vision of dispiriting her.

### **Navigating through the Politics of “Otherness”**

Aristotle's notion of femaleness offers a template for the evaluation of the women

and their reactions to what they experience in the novels. He argues that “female is a female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities. We should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness” (Aristotle's Views on Women”). (Emphasis in the original). Within the context of defective femaleness, Simone de Beauvoir avers that “woman thus seems to be the inessential who never goes back to being the essential, to be the absolute Other, without reciprocity” (131). The depiction of gender relations in the selected novels presents the man as often seeking in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But Nature also inspires in man some ambivalent feelings: “he exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will ...” (*The Second Sex* 133). Thus evidently, the three women whose identifications are deconstructed above are prototypes of contemporary black women in diverse cultures of the world.

Considering the experiences of discrimination and exclusivity of the three protagonists, Alexander Kura conceptualizes those to involve “the denial of self-determination ... But while being wary of what may be termed 'the obvious globalization of discrimination against women', he argues that “discrimination emanates from the erection, maintenance and perpetuation of structures of inequality against women as opposed to men” (27). Janie Crawford Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough* have variously experienced exclusivity on account of their gender. Their encounter of intersectional exclusivity at the private and public domains is both empowering and oppressive. The major challenge that the women face is to resolve the schisms of simultaneous empowerment and oppression to surmount the debilitating impact of the status of “Other”.

Significantly, the women are flexible enough to either bodaciously reject the status of, and the stereotypes associated with an “Other”, or accept and claim the position otherness, and then carefully adjust it to serve their specific visions and targets. Visible among the three women in the three novels is the fact that each of them develops to a watershed, a point at which they query their circumstances, and the treatment that their male counterparts accord them. They see through the caverns and promontories of the male mind that evolve female ignominy, oppression and separatism, which are captured as “Otherness”.

### **The Women and their Watershed in the Novels**

In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie suffers tremendous humiliation and deep smirch especially from Joe Starks, her second husband, who also restrains her from exposing her long and richly luxurious hair or dressing in a manner that projects her beauty, or sitting or joining in conversations with guests at the store. He declares to the guests that “...mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home” (44). He makes constant efforts to talk and put her down; he often strikes her in the presence of guests at the store.

However, the incident involving the failure of Janie's cooking to meet the usual standard – the bread didn't rise and the fish wasn't quite done at the bone, and the rice scorched – led to her self-realization. Her husband, Jody slaps Janie “until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked back to the store” (72). The omniscient narrator describes Janie's reactions to that physical assault: Jan stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered ... In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further (72).

This marks Janie's turning point. Her revolutionary impetus gets ignited, and she no



longer keeps silent when Jody disrespects her, but talks back and abuses him when necessary, and she tears off the head covers and lets down her beautiful hair. By the time Jody dies, and she marries Vergible Woods, also called Tea Cake, she is fully liberated and adventurous, exploring new domains of life and relationships with Tea Cake who cherishes her and exposes her to activities that enhance her personality.

In El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus' derogatory identification engenders different forms of abuse from different people. The process for her liberation starts when she puts up with Bayoumi, the coffee-shop operator, and begins to seek self-development with her secondary school certificate instead of staying in the apartment all day. She discloses:

He took to locking me in the flat before going out. I now slept on the floor... He would come back in the middle of the night, pull the cover away from me, slap my face, and then bear down on me with all his weight. I kept my eyes closed and abandoned my body. It lay there under him without movement, emptied of all desire, or pleasure, or even pain, feeling nothing. A dead body with no life in it at all, like a piece of wood, or an empty sock, or a shoe ... (50).

That is the moment of watershed for Firdaus because she finds herself helpless in an environment that makes no provision for an orphaned girl whose only asset is her secondary school certificate, yet who finds nothing credible to do. Her experiences of brutality and rape by successive men she encounters from childhood, and then by Bayoumi who physically and sexually assaults her, and also gets her gang-raped are emblematic of a rite of passage, a sort of fire baptism that sets her up for an existence that is maintained through the commodification of her very body. That paradoxical paradigm, though seemingly repugnant, is the model that Firdaus adopts, not out of choice, but of necessity, to enjoy inclusivity. That she slumps into prostitution is consistent with her status as "Other", a status that constitutes her albatross, that makes her an object for exploitation by both female (Sherifa) and male (the policeman, Di'aa, the Arab prince, Ibrahim and Marzouk, the pimp). Her murder of Marzouk, therefore, symbolizes her transcendence into freedom.

Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough* is easily categorized as "Other" because she bears the label of the childless woman in a society where child-bearing is fundamental for inclusivity. She stands alone as Obiora, her husband, has been swayed by his mother into marrying a second wife who bears him two sons. The trio of Obiora, his mother and his new wife unleash deep animosity on Amaka, thus engendering occasions that catalyze her quitting her marriage, and leaving the home for Lagos. While in Lagos, she is busy with contract jobs as a means of escaping the status of "Other".

Amaka is conscious that to enjoy inclusivity, with or without being a mother, she must be rich. That mindset impels her to gravitate towards Reverend Father Izu Mclaid who facilitates her obtaining some contract jobs. The omniscient narrator discloses that:

Amaka did strike him though. The way he looked at her at the first meeting. Did she know and was cashing in? It was obvious to the priest. Amaka herself knew that she had made some impression on the man of God. ... She was going to exploit the situation. ... Other things were working in her mind. ... She was going for the kill. A priest was also a man capable of manly feeling. Father Mclaid was a man, not a god. Perhaps Father had never been tempted. She, Amaka, was going to tempt. That was the task that must be done (54).

Amaka's determined socialization with both men and women, as individuals and in groups in Lagos, and especially her successful seduction of Father Mclaid demonstrate her efforts to extricate herself from the status of the "Other". To attain inclusivity in Lagos and ensure that she does not allow her contemptible experiences while in marriage with Obiora in Onitsha to influence her and affect her actions and reactions to events and developments in

Lagos. She “succeeded in tempting him as she said she would, she was going to play her cards well. It was the first time in her life that she had planned the total annihilation of a man ...” (74).

Conscious of the aphorism that “Once beaten, twice shy”, Amaka is strategic in reconfiguring her life in Lagos, especially with the constant advertence to her horrific background that necessitated her relocation to Lagos. She makes a lot of money from the contract jobs, goes back to Onitsha and pays back to Obiora's family the bride price that was paid to her family when she was married. As she gets pregnant, Father Maclaid repudiates his pledge of celibacy to the church, and renounces priesthood to marry Amaka, but she declines his offer of marriage, but proposes just friendship, and this position instigates tremendous curious reactions from Father Mclaid, as follows:

It was irksome for Father Mclaid to think that he could ask to leave the priesthood, because he was involved with a woman who had his twins, and this same woman refused to be his wife. *He had thought that every woman's ambition was to get married, have children and settle down with the man she loved.* Amaka was proving difficult, but he would press on (135-136) (Emphasis mine).

The thrust of the issues that Amaka deals with is stressed in the statement above. Those are issues that identify the woman as “Other”, which implies exclusivity. Amaka defies the advice of the mother and her sister, Ayo, to agree to marry Father Mclaid, and is vehement that, “Let me say it again, I am through with marriage, I am not going to marry Izu ...” (140). She successfully stands her ground against marrying Izu despite all the factors that should allure her into accepting. Amaka's ability to resist by doing something that is unexpected could not have occurred without her persistent rejection of the identification of childlessness that plagued her in her marriage to Obiora. By deciding not to remarry, but to keep the twin babies herself, Amaka controverts Chinweizu's contention that:

A baby is a breathing, bawling, flesh-and-bones cub with which a woman can beat a man down to the ground, and compel him to toil for her ... When she gets tired of supporting herself, she can throw her cares unto some hapless man by getting herself pregnant by him, knowing full well that it would take a heartless man to abandon his child, and that where the baby goes, she, its mother and nurse, would tag along. That is why their baby is probably a wife's ultimate tool for getting, holding and exploiting her husband (42).

Evidently, Amaka is committed to becoming a mother, and redeeming herself from the typical fate of a wife. She considers motherhood and wifeness as mutually exclusive variables. But her idea is incongruous to the general societal conviction.

Generally, the deconstruction of the identifications of the three women, and their strategies in pulverizing every patriarchal structure that threatens their wellbeing reveals the dual-pronged approach deployed by the women to deal with the problem of “Otherness”. The approach comes alive in defiance and violence that the women display especially in their heterogeneous relationships. By their rebellious actions, these women realize that the pathology of black women's condition is not just in the physical oppression processes that imprison the minds. However, as Thomas Parham and others argue, “a deeper problem is how to construct distorted mental representations of the chains which have come to symbolize what are believed and accepted as basic life necessities and core needs” (45). In this connection, Obioma Nnaemeka asserts that the violent acts provide a context for the examination of the relationship of madness, murder and knowledge (19). Indeed, the extremity of the women's activities in the three novels constitutes madness in the purview of the three novels under study in this paper. Also, they deploy their identifications to fight the institutions and individuals that seem to obliterate them or threaten their interests. Being a

fight to sustain self, as a metaphorical war, everything is deployed to ensure success and significant changes afterwards. Discussing the roles and image of women in and after war situations, Marion Pape explains that “image of women becomes radicalized and militarized by the war. ... [Some] women do not lower their eyes any more but instead look straight into men's faces or even over their heads when they speak to them, attitudes which men see as a challenge to their position” and authority (144). After the turning point, each of the women reflects major changes from who she was previously.

### Conclusion

This paper has examined three novels by black women in America, Egypt and Nigeria, to appraise the relational dynamics between the protagonists and men as well as women in different contexts in the novels. It reveals the diverse disparaging ways that the women are viewed in both the micro and macro operational contexts. Each of the women: Janie in Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Firdaus in El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, and Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough*, indicates a specific quest for a true identification and self-definition. By confronting their realities, and seeking to negate the deprecatory images and status of the “Other” exacted on them by societies that are male-dominated, male-centred and male-controlled, where the woman is regarded as “Other”, where intersectional paradigms of female oppression originate, develop and are contained.

By their reactions, Janie, Firdaus and Amaka avoid the paroxysm of defeatism that is generated to compel them into images that will ultimately destroy them. Frantz Fanon's 1967 treatise is significant in this context as it delineates three critical questions that each woman should evaluate and try to answer. They are: (1) Who am I? (2) Am I who I say I am? (3) Am I all I ought to be?” (68) Parham and others explain clarify that “Who am I?” is the question of identity, where it is important to understand the nature of one's humanness. Am I who I say I am?” is a question of achieving congruence in assessing how our spiritual, cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions align with our self-definition. “Am I all I ought to be?” is a question of self-actualization where one seeks to achieve the fullest expression of all that one is supposed to become” (42) Thus, evidently, the three protagonists successfully design specific processes and intervention blueprints to rectify the mental misrepresentations that the society is often inclined to. The ontological confutations that emerge from the tensions between the identities that present the woman as an “Other”, and the authentic Self that is hardly recognized is what contemporary women seek to reverse as portrayed in the novels examined in this paper.

The three novels are discursive stories that encode the experiences of the female protagonists, and their efforts at negotiating and manoeuvring through their status as Other. The novels highlight dominant indictments on societies “in which women ... are the Other, one that is not only oppressive to women but one in which women act as oppressive agents to other women ...” (Calixthe Beyala 102).

This paper indicates that the reactions of the three women to the socio-cultural mechanisms that oppugn their interests are consistent with their desire to live as Self, and be active members of the mainstream. Essentially, the three of them are prototypes of modern womanhood that have been able to deal with the quandary that Ntozake Shange alludes to in her statement that “... bein' alive and bein' a woman and bein' colored is a metaphysical dilemma” (45). Indeed, black women's activities and family experiences create the conditions whereby the contradictions between everyday experiences and the controlling

images of black womanhood become visible. Seeing the contradictions in the ideologies open them up for demystification (Patricia Collins 99). The outcome of the deconstruction of the three protagonists in the novels studied in this paper addresses Simone de Beauvoir's statement that "... to be a woman would mean to be the object, the Other – and the Other nevertheless remains subject in the midst of her resignation (46). It also provides answers to de Beauvoir's questions: "What place has humanity made for this portion of itself which, while included within it, is defined as the Other? What rights have been conceded to it? How have men defined it?" (60). Obviously, Janie, Firdaus and Amaka have on the one hand, variously resolved the female conundrum that represents an albatross which their foremothers bore, and on the other hand, set a template for contemporary and future black women.

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