

**CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND THE CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN
WOMAN IN UNOMA AZUAH'S SKY HIGH FLAMES**

Aorabee, Rhoda Andrea M.

*English Department,
Benue State University, Makurdi
rhodaaorabee@gmail.com*

&

Tayol, Raphael Terhemba

*English Department,
Benue State University, Makurdi
tayolter@gmail.com*

Abstract

Women in the African society have known social, cultural and political dispossession over the past decades. The socially and culturally constructed norms and expectations that shape what and how women should think and perform in the society have implications for their empowerment and subsequent development generally. The overall pattern of gender norms favours men in the distribution of power, resources and opportunities. Cultural traditions, norms, and expectations have often perpetuated gender inequality, causing physical and psychological harm to millions of women across Africa. In this paper, through the tenets of Raymond Williams' ideology on Cultural Materialism, an analysis of Unoma Azuah's Sky High Flames, depicts a young African woman's typical problems in traditional African society: the domestic labour required of girls, the practical harsh reality of preparing for a lifetime of drudgery, the requirement to fulfill social expectations by marriage, the attainment of social status through childbirth, the expectation that wives will accede to the prescribed sexual standards in marriage, and the power politics in sexual relations between men and women. The paper discovers that the contemporary woman in Africa is fed up with some of these norms that attempt to stifle her as such norms hinder her development and emphasises the need to look into such unfavourable conditions which are the positions of the oppositional group. The paper concludes that there should be a just gender system in which there are no asymmetries of access to the allocation of status, power and material resources in especially contemporary African society.

Introduction

The African society has been one that favours men above women, it is a patriarchal society. The African woman suffers relegation in one form or the other in the society. She makes efforts to satisfy her male counterpart in the society through sacrifices that are sometimes detrimental to her. The woman is hardly ever noticed and appreciated as a

corner is designated for her and boundaries set with the expectation that she must not cross. Formerly, the woman was not allowed to acquire western education; she was given out in marriage and the dowry used to train her male siblings and other male children in the family. The traditional woman is typically not allowed to be free in a patriarchal space. She is owned just like any other property. Participating in socio-political activities was, hitherto, a forbidden agenda for the African woman. The portion of the woman was domestic affairs; she carried out the drudgery and fulfilled procreation business. There was this apartness that often existed between the African man and the woman that somewhat relegated the woman to the background.

Lately, the African woman and women writers, especially, began to write about their experiences, laying bare such issues, and noting this relegation meted out to them. Through their literatures, they began to protest and accentuate their humanity, praying that they be treated like the human beings that they are instead of as objects that are rather owned. The overall pattern of norms and cultural traditions in the society are especially those that favour the man greatly; the woman is left with emotional and physical harm owing to these norms. She, therefore, decries the relegation she faces and the writer depicts these issues in her writings. A review of novels by African women clarifies this point. The contemporary woman suffers these relegations and has chosen to revolt by carving out a better niche for herself. The woman has also become stoic in the sense that she does not allow relegation to curtail her development but has risen above it.

Writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie, Unoma Azuah, and others, have mentioned that in spite of the hardship they face, they have the self-assertion and determination to make progress. That is dependent on their own will rather than the external conservative factors that attempt to stifle their personal growth and development. In portraying how the African woman has risen above cultural expectations and is committed to carving a better life for herself, Gloria Chukukere reviews Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* to elaborate this point. Through the character of the heroine in the novel which represents the African woman at large, Chukukere asserts that "Adah defies her Nigerian social custom that recognises the importance of females only as bringers of bride price and bearers of male issue" (168). The statement clarifies the idea that the woman is a commodity for the bride price that she fetches, and is expected to be the bearer of children with preference to the male child.

The typical Nigerian woman is brainwashed from inception to think that she can never be independent of the other sex. She can only be respected in society when she bears the name of the man who has paid the price over her, and can achieve some social status only when she can bear children, especially male ones, for the continuation of the family lineage. In contemporary times, the woman has realised that she can be independent of a

man and can achieve social status and be happy without compromising her natural role in procreation. This means that she can develop herself through education and other socioeconomic enterprises just like her male counterpart. The contemporary woman seeks ways to better life for not just herself but also her family and the society at large. She does this by breaking away from obsolete traditional norms and values that she is expected to adhere to which, rather than favour her, only limit her potentialities.

Inasmuch as the contemporary woman does not want to be seen as being disobedient, she is bent on breaking the norms which subject her to certain disabilities and stifling conditions. The contemporary African woman has made efforts to acquire education and look for ways through which she can enjoy a balanced complementary social status with the man as a human being instead of the apartness that used to be her position.

Concurring with this position, Onukaogu, Allwell Abalogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu state that "... the central figures [in Adichie's novels] are women, especially strong women, who are able to assert themselves and carve out respectable personalities in a society that is reputed to restrict the influence of women" (198). What Onukaogu and Onyerionwu mean here is that, Adichie is able to present to us a new dimension of the female group that has emerged. We see strong women thriving against all forms of discrimination to become important personalities on their own in the society. The consciousness of the African woman has grown past the level of lamentation over many discriminatory tendencies meted out to her. In spite of the intense suppression, she does not allow herself to be deterred. She forges ahead and seeks ways to rise above societal limitations and excel.

Today's woman has discovered herself and is spurred by the popular statement by Kwame Nkrumah that "if you train a man, you train an individual, but if you train a woman, you have trained a nation" (Onyerionwu 385). The thrust of this paper is, therefore, to elucidate how the woman has thrived against all forms of discrimination meted out to her personality and psyche. The paper uses Unoma Azuah's novel, *Sky-High Flames*, to buttress this fact. The stifling conditions in the novel are highlighted and the different ways through which the African woman today has carved better quarters for herself are also portrayed. The statement of the novel is the need to emphasise the humanity of mankind. And, the essence is to show how the central figure has developed a thick skin against her relegation and has made effort to become a respectable personality in the society.

Apart from portraying that the woman has carved better quarters for herself, the text shows that the woman often contributes to her being enslaved in the society by endorsing the status quo and maintaining the social order in the society. This contributes to her

dilemmas as it mentality approves her servitude and endorses her as a man's possession. The different aspects of life where the African woman has become defiant in a bid to develop herself. *Sky-High Flames* is further elucidated by using Raymond Williams' theory of cultural materialism to decipher the unjust system in which the contemporary African woman seeks to regain her personality and eccentricity.

Synopsis of *Sky-High Flames*

The story is told in the first-person narrative. It is about a young girl, Ofunne, who has so much zeal for education. Ofunne Ofil is the first daughter of her parents. Her father is married to two wives. As the first daughter, she performs all the family chores. Her brothers do nothing and both her father and mother take turns in calling her to do the chores at home. Ofunne yearns to become a teacher so that she can marry the man of her dreams. She passes her exams to go to the Girl's Training College in Enugu with her friend Awele. Awele's father takes the girls to school in Enugu. At school, Ofunne makes quick adjustments and becomes a friend to Sister Maureen Dolan. The sister becomes a mother figure to Ofunne. She spends Sundays at school, in the convent, reading. On one of those Sundays in the convent, a man visits her. The man is sent to visit her in school by her father. She gets to know through Awele's father that her mother is sick back home and that her father's intention is to withdraw her from school so she can be married off. Ofil's will finally prevails as Ofunne eventually leaves school to marry Oko Okolo who had already paid and performed the marriage functions by proxy. Straight from school, Mr. Okolo takes Ofunne to Kaduna, with the promise to give her a society wedding and sponsor her to further her education. Once in Kaduna, Ofunne discovers that Okolo is a man of double words, the big society wedding promised was not to be, rather the wedding is a hasty one, with only a couple of witnesses.

Ofunne's education is stalled. She is faced with difficulties in her marriage and the challenge of infertility caused by syphilis that Okolo infected her with. She seeks ways to get out of the challenge, so she begins to sell fish to raise money to take care of herself and also escape boredom. When she finally became pregnant, the baby did not survive because the syphilis infection has not been properly treated. During the course of investigating the cause of her baby's death, Ofunne discovered that Okolo is still heavily infected with the disease and because of the shame he would face, he fled, leaving Ofunne to the care of his parents in a deceitful manner. Ofunne decided to pick up from where she stopped and soar high again in her educational pursuit, abandoning her marriage to Okolo. Azuah told the story in five untitled chapters in a simple language.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Cultural Materialism as its theoretical framework. Cultural materialism is a theoretical framework and research method for examining the relationship between

the physical and economic aspects of production in the society, social organisations, social relations and the values, beliefs, and worldviews that dominate a particular society. According to Charles Bressler, Cultural Materialism is a British branch of cultural poetics that is openly Marxist in its theories and overtly political and cultural in its aims. It finds its ideological roots in the writing of Marxist critics like Louis Althusser and Raymond Williams. Believing that literature can serve as an agent of change in contemporary society, cultural materialists declare that any culture's hegemony is basically unstable. This means that for literature to produce change, a critic must read the words of the established 'canon against the grain', which is reading a text and emphasising its political nature. Its oppositional values that emerge and are different from the dominant values or assumptions are explored, noting the changes in norms or assumptions. By so doing, the critic "exposes the politically unconscious to the text and helps debunk the social and political myth created by the bourgeoisie" (24).

Cultural materialism emphasises the dissidents or effectiveness, following Williams' adaptation of Gramsci's view of hegemony, and that there are always alternatives to the hegemony (dominant cultures). The theory gives ear to the alternative cultures that form the society. Cultural materialism established itself permanently in the field of literary studies in the mid 1980s. According to Hans Bertens, cultural materialism became a critical tool in literature with the publication of Jonathan Dollimore's *Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology, and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* in 1984 and Catherine Belsey's *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* in 1985 and of two other collections of essays: *Alternative Shakespeare* and *Political Shakespeare*, and *New Essays in Cultural Materialism* by Dollimore and Alan Sinfield...

Ashley Crossman states that although cultural materialism emerged in the late 1960s and was first popularised within the field of anthropology by Marvin Harris in his book *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, it was only developed fully in the 1980s. Raymond Williams, a Welsh academic further developed the paradigm and research method and, in so doing, created the field of cultural studies in the 1980s, which embraced the political nature of Marx's theory and his critical focus on power and class structure. Williams' cultural materialism took aim at how culture and cultural products relate to a class-based system of domination and oppression.

Williams built his theory of cultural materialism using already existing theoretical critiques of the relationships between culture and power. Williams asserts that culture itself is a 'productive process'. This means that it is responsible for making intangible things like ideas, assumptions, and social relations exist in society. The theory of cultural materialism that Williams developed holds that 'as a productive process is part of the

larger process of how a class system is made and remade and it is connected to the class based inequalities that pervade society, culture and cultural products play these roles through the promotion and justification of certain values, assumptions, and worldviews within the mainstream and the marginalisation of others that do not fit the mainstream mold. He calls them ‘residual’, ‘emergent’, and ‘oppositional’ cultural elements to the hegemony, putting the dominant culture always under pressure from alternative views and beliefs (Bertens 148).

According to Bertens, the theory objects to downplay or undermining the dissent or dissent effectiveness. He says that:

[f]or Williams, the dominant culture is always under pressure from alternative views and beliefs. So, while cultural materialists’ analysis of literary texts brings to light how these texts are (inevitably conservative) instrument of a dominant socio-cultural order, they also demonstrate how the apparent coherence of that order is threatened from the inside by inner contradictions and by tensions that it seeks to hide. (148)

Cultural materialism identifies possibilities for the rejection and/or subversion of a dominant hegemonic position. This is one reason why Graham Holderness describes it as a “politicised form of historiography” (Barry 182); meaning that it studies historical materials within a politicised framework, a framework that includes the present which those literary texts or other materials have helped to shape in some way. Many scholars who followed Williams’ tradition expanded his theory of cultural materialism, which was focused on class inequalities to include the consideration of racial inequalities and their connection to culture, as well as those of gender, sexuality, and nationality, among others. The relevance of the theory to this paper is that it helps to elucidate the development of the African woman in the society in spite of the expectation that she remains in societal apartness as spelt out for her via cultural norms. The paper achieves this by beaming its light on the oppositional values that threaten the dominant order of patriarchy and noting the changes that have been made along the line, hence the contemporary viewpoint of the African woman. The cultural materialist critic uses the themes of the text, the characters, characterisation and language to show how dominant cultures are threatened by opposition, noticing the change in assumptions, or values over time.

Alternatively, the thematic preoccupation is explored to show the resistant nature of the emerging cultures that usually affect the dominant culture relating it to society. This paper adopts thematic preoccupation in analysing the text to show how the characters are symbolic, representing different groups as reflected in the society and how the major characters upset and distort the social order, noting the historical change of what is obtainable as against what used to be in the past, culminating into the past and the present position of the African woman. The cultural expectation evident in the text and the

instances where the contemporary African woman is daring are elucidated via the themes inherent in Azuah's *Sky-High Flames*.

Textual Analysis

Drudgery and Delineated Roles

The contemporary African woman has discovered that the onus is on her to challenge and change certain norms. That is why she laments over drudgery and craves for assistance in the multiple roles she plays. The heroine in the text, Ofunne complains bitterly that she does the whole work as though she is the only one in the house, even when she has brothers. This is evident when she says, "I am tired of this house. Ofunne here; Ofunne there. Am I a machine? Iloba is there; nobody calls him. Ike is there, too" (9). From her statement, it is obvious that as the only girl in the house, she is subjected to so much. She has to cater for the needs of the other members of the family. She has less time for herself and no time for rest. She is involved in performing the entire chores without being assisted or appreciated.

She keeps up with this protest as she complains: "as the first daughter I've always had to cater to everyone's need but any minute spen[t] by myself was called daydreaming" (7). This is the life expected of the African woman as prescribed by the patriarchal society. The little time Ofunne takes to rest is called 'daydreaming,' by her mother. Ofunne's mother is quick to ask whether her brothers will be there to assist her in her marital responsibilities. In her words, she says: "one day, I hope you'll tell me who will run your home when you get married; maybe you'll hire me or your brothers to help you cook, clean and take care of your husband" (9). This implies that the traditional African culture spells out work-non-stop for the women in homes. The agitation that Azuah accentuates through this depiction is for the man to realise that it is healthier, for family development, to assist the woman with home tasks and chores as this will yield much more happiness. Azuah depicts instances in the text where Okolo assisted Ofunne with the chores at home when she felt hurt and needed rest. According to the text, "... he [Okolo] didn't mind doing the entire housework and cooking for us" (96). Evidently, chores are not meant for a particular gender. One then wonders why the cultural or social constructions attribute different roles to men and others to women.

From a cultural materialist perspective, it is pertinent to state that since this is socially constructed, it is liable to change because Ofunne, the major character of the novel, disrupts the social order by refusing to do any work when she is offended by her husband. He takes it upon himself and is able to do all the roles assigned to the woman without qualms. This is an indication that roles can be swapped when circumstances necessitate. When Okolo realises that he has hurt his wife badly and wants to earn her forgiveness, "he would cook and wash his clothes himself" (101). He would walk about seven miles

away from their home to fetch water to appease his wife. When Mama Abu told him that “you didn’t have to come” he replied that “an extra bucket of water would help” (101 – 2). In the natural African setting, he would have shouted at Ofunne or beaten her up to demonstrate his manly role and responsibility.

These depictions are a notification that times are changing and cultural expectations are being altered gradually. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo never did any of the chores at home for whatever reason. In contrast, Azuah has presented a man who rather helps himself and the community by performing chores which hitherto were assigned to women. This makes the society a more humanised place, where people are treated with respect, not minding their gender. Azuah presents the way women are tailored and how their men treat them through another female character towards the end of the novel at the scene where Okolo defends his wife in public to the admiration of other women. The woman laments: “my husband’s buttocks are glued to our cushion chair and his eyes to the TV. He won’t even fetch a cup of water for himself” (102). This means the woman is responsible for everything in the house.

These depictions are a clear indication that there is need for gender collaboration for positive development. Apart from precipitating a change in domestically-assigned roles, the requirement to fulfill the socio-cultural obligation by marriage is another perturbing issue bothering the contemporary African woman. The theme of marriage tackles how this challenge is handled by the contemporary African woman.

Forced and Arranged Marriage(s)

Mostly, the African society grooms the girl-child for marriage. In this regard, any daughter from an African lineage that remains unmarried after attaining maturity is considered deviant, has no respect and is termed irresponsible. The African culture has spelt out that when a girl-child attains maturity, she is made to assimilate the fact that she is ready to be married off. As a result, most girls get used to this fact and seek nothing else in life than to prepare for marriage. In most African societies, the moment hormonal changes become visible in a girl’s body system, she is perceived to be ripe for marriage and arrangements are immediately concluded for her marriage with or without her consent. In *Sky-High Flames*, Ofunne’s western education is interrupted so she can marry a stranger against her wish. Despite her yearning to be educated and become a teacher, her parents choose a marriage life for her instead; they marry her off to Okolo for money.

Ofunne, an obedient daughter, marries Okolo, a man she has never met. Although she wants to obtain high school certificate, she is not allowed to continue her education because the family needs money. In her lamentations, Ofunne states her life’s desire saying: “I wanted to be well-educated, with a high school certificate. I wanted to become

a teacher and get married to the man of my dreams ... I would be happy to take a break from my parents and to work towards what I want” (1).

From these words, it is obvious that Ofunne is determined and has a personal dream of becoming a teacher before getting married. She has no intention of absconding from the laid down traditional rules of being married. Her desire is to carve out a better life before marrying someone she knows and loves. When Ofunne realises that she is to be married off to a man without her consent, she confronts her father in a subtle protest. She says: “... Papa, you want to marry me off to a stranger because you need money? ... you even made up your mind without consulting me” (76). Azuah presents this as emerging protest that should serve as an allusion for other contemporary women who want to make or have a choice in their lives.

Although, the writer does not wish to present Ofunne’s protest as though it is a marxist opinion, she recreates the character of Ofunne in a manner that accommodates deference to socially-constructed authorities. This is evident in her conclusion on the matter when she says: “... my heart cringed at the thought of getting married because of money, but I decided not to continue arguing with my father” (76). This shows that the fight for her personal assertiveness does not refute the fact that she needs to accord respect to her parents. Even when she is prompted by her parents to leave school for her husband’s house, she does not exhibit an open contemptuous countenance. She only expresses her grief saying: “... it was the same day that I discovered that I was leaving for Kaduna with Oko. My parents had performed our traditional marriage by proxy and there was no need for me to return home ...” (89).

Even though Ofunne chose to obey her parents, the marriage becomes unworkable because it was rushed and not consented to. The lack of trust emanates from the fact that they hardly knew each other and Ofunne chose to leave Okolo alone after his thoughtless action of upholding his pride at the expense of Ofunne’s life.

Attaining Social Status through Childbirth

The African environment has placed a high premium on the issue of childbirth such that it often determines the utilitarian value of a woman in a marriage and the survival of many a marriage depends on it. Azuah presents this, too, as a tormenting matter that causes unhappiness and creates a void in the life of the contemporary African woman. From the text, Ofunne is unable to conceive during the first months of her marriage and is disturbed. She keeps thinking about her delay in being pregnant. She believes that having a baby can reduce her pain of loneliness and unhappiness. Ofunne, therefore, does all it takes for her to be able to conceive. She performs the role of the typical woman and goes to ask Okolo if they could seek medical attention. Her words are so pleasant and loving in her

presentation thus: “Oko, see it’s been more than nine months now, and I’m not yet pregnant. Don’t you think we should do something about it?” (113), the typical response that comes from the African male chauvinist resounds in Okolo’s reply when he says: “Do something like what? You’re too impatient” (113). The woman is always blamed for failure to conceive. Often times the male counterpart is responsible for the failure to produce just like Okolo in the text; however, the African society blames the woman in this case, probably, because she carries the pregnancy.

Azuah presents the contemporary African woman as being proactive. Ofunne tries to investigate the cause of her lack of procreation. She does not relent until she discovers she is pregnant and becomes devastated when she lost her child to the cold hands of death. Apart from the expectations of the African culture for the woman to bear children, the woman herself is happier when her marriage is crowned with children. Even the most educated and exposed woman would give anything to conceive and bear a child. Chukukere concurs with the view that “the potential seriousness of a couple’s inability to procreate is accepted both by the community and the individual concerned...

Motherhood is the prerequisite of womanhood and its loss parallels a rebuttal of the essence of one’s social existence and therefore a death” (125). But the situation is, in most cases, a complicated one that needs to be handled with diplomacy and mediation to arrive at a cognitive solution. For instance, Ofunne’s case of not being able to conceive is not a total liability. She has been infected with a sexually-transmitted disease which causes her miscarriage even when she got pregnant. The presentation of this call for a collaborative effort for the African man to assist the contemporary African woman in achieving and attaining social status and, by extension, happiness when such issues emanate. Cultural delineation should not always define strict explanations to circumstances like this.

Education

It is a known fact that the African man did nothing to educate the female child until a robust campaign for girl-child education was undertaken, and the result is manifested through this research. It was, hitherto, claimed that the girl-child is for marriage or investment, and when eventually married, belonged to the matrimonial bed chamber, otherwise known as “the other room”. There is a contemporary realisation that the only way to remove women’s marginalisation is through sensitisation, enlightenment and education.

In *Sky-High Flames*, though Ofunne is from a rural setting, she yearns for education as her desire is “...to be well-educated with a high school certificate ... to become a teacher and to get married to the man of [her] dreams” (7). Her parents tell her that she needs to

drop out of school since they cannot afford her fees any more, she depends on Sister Dolan to help her secure a school job of sorting out mails and delivering them to various hostels to fend for her education. She has time to do this during the thirty minutes break period and, sometimes, during the siesta period in school. (81 – 2). The percentage of women who want to be educated like Ofunne has increased, although, traditionally the woman is an investment to be gained or given away to the highest bidder. The desire for education has now propelled women to be educated and to acquire skills that can make them self-reliant to complement the efforts of their male counterparts.

Power Politics, Sexual Relations and the Contemporary African Woman

In the past, the woman as an observer in decision making had no say or right to say anything concerning sexual matters. According to Chukukere, “traditionally, the woman is conceived of as a vehicle through which a man satisfies his needs ... (186). This is plausible because it was the situation that women found themselves in. The contemporary African woman does not consider sexual topic a taboo. She has discovered it is a path to tread and is not ashamed to say whether she is interested in sexual issues or not. In the text, even as a teen, the expectation is that Ofunne would have had sex with her husband on their first night is high. However, she refuses to lie even close to Okolo, stating: “we are not yet married ... even though they have done the ceremonies at home; I won’t feel married until we marry in the church” (94 – 5). This statement shows how the woman has assumed some form of development and power to talk about sexual matters, a thing that was before now men’s talk and decision. Again, even Okolo traditionally would have insisted on his right to have sex with the girl without her consent since he already paid the bride price but because Ofunne is vehement and flees from the room, he had to do the needful, thus:

[t]he next morning, he hurried out without a bath and returned at midnight. The following day he rushed me into a small empty Catholic Church with a used wedding gown Mama Abu had hurriedly bought for me. The only witnesses were two priests, Mama Abu and Abu. His so-called friends who were supposed to have attended the wedding from all over the country never showed up. There was no elaborate party to show me off; and the anticipated huge feast never occurred. (95)

This demonstrates the fact that the wedding took place at all because it was a prerequisite for Okolo to savour his bride. The objectivity in Ofunne’s refusal to have sex with her husband remains a demonstration of the fact that the contemporary African woman now has a voice that should be heard and considered. To actualise this, Azuah creates a male voice that subtly replies in affirmation and collaboration so that there is no conflict leading to violence of any kind.

Apart from participating actively in sexual matters, the contemporary African woman also talks about sexuality more freely. Ofunne talks boldly about her sexual engagement when she says: “he started rubbing my back. I pushed his hand away and sat up, but the sight of his long and stiff penis made me yelp in horror. It was big and was swinging back and forth as if it had a life of its own” (95). Her expressions show no remorse for either her actions or inactions during sex affairs with a man who is her husband. After the wedding, Ofunne grants permission for the man to have his way sexually with her. She still summons courage to explicate vividly what transpired during their sex event. According to her, “as he struggled to get into me, his pants got in his way, so he peeled off his clothes and jabbed at me with such hostility that I told him to slow down, and he tried, though every jab came with such an intense pain that I pushed him off several times” (95). Again, when the couple travels home for her pregnancy delivery, Ofunne explains that “we had argued about sex in Kaduna, though I’d made it clear that I was not going to have sex till I have my baby, that didn’t stop him from trying. But I was not going to lose my baby just because he could not spend a day without wanting to stick his penis somewhere” (137). It is obvious that women have developed their ability to talk about sex matters bluntly without shame and contempt. This is the African woman’s contemporary disposition to sexual relations. They have become more exposed, assertive and proactive in sexual politics.

The issue of polygamy is also relevant in the discussion of sexual power politics. It is a general view in recent times that the African man is (directly or indirectly) polygamous. According to Chukukere, “... a man is free to indulge in sexual escapades. It is obligatory that his female counterpart retain her virginity until marriage; otherwise, she is permanently tainted” (207). This means that men engage in sexual relationship; they have the sole chauvinistic right and are superior in the African society. Azuah has stated through Ofunne in *Sky-High Flames* that “there would be fewer problems if my father had my mother as his wife” (25). Azuah indicates the needlessness of having more wives. Mama Isioma, who is supposed to be Ofunne’s step mother, becomes a thorn between Okolo’s wives. As a result of jealousy, she engages in fetish acts so as to cast a curse on her mate, Ofunne’s mother.

Azuah also presents Angelina as a traditional woman who has accepted that her husband is polygamous and tries to persuade Ofunne that since men are polygamous, Ofunne should concentrate on raising the family and pay less attention to Okolo’s escapades. According to her, “men are like that—polygamous. You have to get used to it ... and live with it ... sometimes months would pass and I wouldn’t see my husband. When he did return, he smelled of women’s perfume. I never confronted him about it as he took good

care of me and our baby” (100). This is an indication that the woman is urged and expected to condone her husband’s infidelity for peace and development to reign.

As Angelina implores the heroine to accept Okolo’s infidelity, she declines and replies to Angelina, “I will not watch my husband fool around with women and fold my hands and do nothing. It would be different if I didn’t find out; but if it is thrown in my face, I must punish him. He has to pay for it in some way” (101). This declination is Azuah’s refrain from what is amoral and detrimental to social morality. Okolo’s double sexual standards manifest in his coming home late, leaving his wife lonely and through the syphilis that he infected his wife with, which had caused her to lose her baby apart from the emotional pain she underwent. This aspect of Okolo’s life coupled with the fact that he is more concerned with covering up his shame at the detriment of seeking aid for himself and his wife led the heroine to forgo the marriage and pick up her life from there. This is the contemporary woman’s bid to create a comfort zone for herself and begin to have a say in sexual affairs between herself and her male counterpart.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the fact that the contemporary African woman has developed herself from a somewhat timid woman to a liberal kind of woman who is assertive, strong, confident, and proactive in all facets of her life. The usual marginalisation or relegation experienced has not deterred her from self-development. In spite of the apartness that is associated with women in Africa, the contemporary woman has refused to remain in that bend, and has sought, and is continuously seeking, ways to carve a comfort zone and remain in it for a better society.

Having glanced at the various ways that the contemporary woman has carved a niche for herself in the face of dire African cultural and traditional expectations, the paper concludes that due to the respect that the woman has for the African culture, she has developed certain ways in which the culture and traditions of Africa can be upheld but has busted certain norms that continue to relegate the woman to the social background. Meaning that the African woman is interested in upholding values that humanise her, thereby resisting the dehumanising norms, and has sought ways to ameliorate the sufferings, whether psychologically or physically, that are associated with the various discriminations meted out to her by the society. As a result, normative values that degrade the woman, like child and forced marriage, polygamy, female genital excision, wife inheritance, and wife battering are gradually waning as opposed to what was obtainable in the past. The paper envisages just like Azuah that once the woman is incorporated into every aspect of life in the society, she will be in a partnership relationship with the African man to ensure a sustainable and developed society in every ramification.

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