African Feminism/Womanism and Gender Complementarity in Ngugi wa Thiong'O's Novels

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Abstract
This paper deploys the postulations of African womanism/feminism to examine gender complementarity in three of Ngugi wa Thiong'O's novels: *The River Between, A Grain of Wheat,* and *Petals of Blood.* While the prominent role Ngugi accords his female characters has been acknowledged and explored critically, how he deploys the African feminist/womanist ideology in his writings, and uses his writings to advocate for gender complementarity within the African socio-cultural reality seems to have been ignored. This, however, should not be taken to mean that critics have not at all acknowledged the gender complementarity phenomenon in Ngugi's works. The problem is that even when they do, it is usually subsumed within the framework of a larger discourse. The significance of this paper, therefore, lies in its elaborate examination of this subject in Ngugi's aesthetic universe using the theoretical lens of African womanism/feminism.

Introduction
Arguably, the fundamental usefulness of the feminist theoretical lens to critical praxis is in its deployment to the interrogation of how a work of art promotes or undermines the female condition. While the general tendency is to use it in the investigation of how a male-oriented work undermines the female situation, its application to Ngugi's novels in this paper is ironically geared towards demonstrating how they (Ngugi's novels) promote women, and women issues. In this regard, rather than subordinating women to men, and their issues to that of men; Ngugi shows how important women and men are to the well-being of each other, and even to national/public issues. This paper, therefore, deploys the postulations of African womanism/feminism to examine gender complementarity in three of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novels: *The River Between, A Grain of Wheat,* and *Petals of Blood.*

Although Ngugi's creative oeuvre is certainly more than the three novels chosen, this paper nevertheless restricts itself to this selection because they seem to represent the three phases of Ngugi's artistic productions. These three phases,

however, is not so much on account of when the works were written and published as it is on the events and incidents represented in them. For instance, while *The River Between* (1965) recounts the story of colonialism/invasion of the Whites into the socio-political and socioeconomic landscape of Kenya, *Grain of Wheat* (1967)tells the story of Keyan's preparation for independence. As regards the *Petals of Blood* (1977), it depicts the events and incidents in Kenya after independence. Thus, the three novels represent not only the three phases of Ngugi's artistic productions, but also the three stages of Kenyan's development as a nation-state. In each of these three stages, either in the struggle against colonialism, the preparation for independence, or the post-independence disillusionment; Ngugi shows how his major female and male characters must cooperate to survive the onslaught of both the foreign and indigenous exploiters and oppressors.

The Critical Reception of Ngugi's Novels

Yet, although the prominent role Ngugi accords his female characters has been acknowledged and explored critically, how he uses his writings to advocate for gender complementarity within the African socio-cultural reality seems to have been ignored. Most of the critical commentaries on the novels under consideration have either evaluated the female characters as victims of patriarchy and colonialism or have subjected their characterisation to stylistic analysis. For instance, in his seminal book, *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition*, David Ker comments on the centrality of the role Ngugi accords Wanja in *Petals of Blood* to the extent that the reader could easily take the novel to be about her as she is shown as the driving force of Ilmorog (83), while Ferdinand Asoo's *The African Novel and the Realist Tradition* portrays the same character only as a revolutionary force of Marxist orthodoxy (218). Her role in Abdulla's business and in the life of Joseph does not take a focal point in these studies while Nyakinyua's advisory role towards the advancement of the community was never acknowledged.

Another area that takes the attention of most critics is their obsession with narrative technicalities and styles in these novels. A large chunk of Eustace Palmer's *The Growth of the African Novel* is dedicated to the comparison of *Weep Not Child*, *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* in terms of characterisation, narrative techniques, symbolism and other formal features with a view to identifying basically their areas of similarities. The strength of these works are therefore judged, from Palmer's perspective, on the basis of style rather than their ideological relevance to the society. Palmer's character study does not

give consideration to gender complementary roles which stands out in these novels. In reaction to Palmer's valid critical exercise, Asoo contends that *Petals of Blood* differs significantly from *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat* but admits that they share a few thematic concerns (205) while Ker concludes that the novels of Ngugi, especially *Petals of Blood,* are about ideas (75). Whatever "thematic concerns" and/or "ideas" these novels share or represent in the framework of the foregoing criticisms cannot otherwise be termed as gender complementarity which none of these seasoned critics seem to take into consideration.

Terry Eagleton, however, offers a corrective instruction to the notion of style by tilting the readers' attention to the issue of ideology as the nucleus of a literary work. Eagleton opines, "to write well is more than a matter of 'style'; it also means having at one's disposal an ideological perspective which can penetrate the realities of men's [and women's] experience in a certain situation" (8). Premised on Eagleton's maxim, Ngugi has written accordingly in his depiction of Afrocentric feminist ideology in *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat,* and *Petals of Blood*.

In the introduction to his well-written biography titled *Ngugi wa Thiong'O,* Simon Gikandi gives an elucidating conclusion on the plethora of approaches from which Ngugi's works can be read:

> Several paths are open to the reader who wants to examine Ngugi's literary…works in their historical and cultural context: one can choose, for example, to read them as specific commentaries on the African experience as it emerges from colonial domination [in *The River Between*] and moves into the theatre of independence [in *A Grain of Wheat*] and postcoloniality [in *Petals of Blood*]. One could read these works from the ideological perspective provided by the author himself… (1)

Although Ngugi's novels under study would be read from all the perspectives suggested by Gikandi - historical, cultural, and ideological perspectives, it is with a view to highlighting Ngugi's underlying ideology of gender complementarity/African feminism, which has no place in Gikandi's study.

Against this backdrop, the conclusion Ker offers in the critical reading of A *Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*, and by extension *The River Between* after his

attempt to squarely situate the works within the modernist framework is comforting as it provides a good platform for reading these works from the neglected perspective of African feminism. Ker posits, "[b]oth*A Grain of Whea*t and *Petals of Blood* ask readers to adopt more than one perspective" (76) in thematic, stylistic and ideological analyses. One of such perspectives is the African feminism/womanism as it relates to the concept of gender complementarity which is the central focus of this paper.

This, however, should not be taken to mean that critics have not at all acknowledged the gender complementarity phenomenon in Ngugi's works. Few of such critics who have hinted at gender complementarity are Manisha Shamba and Garima Dubey in their recent work, "Gender Dimensions in the Fiction of Ngugi wa Thiongo" in which inferences are glibly made to the question of gender complementarity in the selected novels. The critics opine that recognition of gender empowerment, equity and partnership as the only fair and effective method of ensuring distribution of resources in the society is suggested in the works of Ngugi. And, "for progress of the society," they assert, "these principles should be guarded at all cost by both men and women" (154). Although the effort of the critics in dressing their thoughts in the garb of gender complementarity is quite commendable, the assertion is just a hint or a passing comment that is subsumed under the larger discourse of mainstream feminism whose impacts do not last longer than the footmarks of a camel in the shifting dust of the desert of the African continent. This is particularly more so since these critics in the same work identify Nyamburainas the ideal African feminist protagonist in *The River Between* in place of Mariamu.

Nettie Cloete in a paper, "Women and transformation: A recurrent theme in Head and Ngugi" opines that a chronological reading of Ngugi's novels "indicates a new conception of empowered women because the female protagonists usually grow in strength and influence" (35). Cloete's opinion justifies the attention women have enjoyed in Ngugi's work though he is accused of representing them in traditionally and patriarchally stereotypical manner. (32). Aside her criticism that Ngugi represents his female characters in traditionally and patriarchally stereotypical manner, it is also clear that she does not take into cognizance that these women did not "grow in strength and influence" in isolation but in relation and connection with their men. The problem, therefore, is that even when critics talk/write of gender complementarity, it is usually subsumed within the framework of a larger discourse of feminism which necessitates the present critical exercise.

Contexualizing African Womanism/Feminism in Relation to Gender Complementarity

In contradistinction to the prevalent gender discourse that attends Ngugi's narratives, this paper focuses its critical lens on gender complementarity in Ngugi's novels using the postulations of African womanism/feminism. Irrespective of the appellation such as Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Snail-sense feminism, Toni Morrison's Gynocriticism, Alice Walker's Womanism, Clenora Hudson-Weem's African Womanism, Chikwenye Ogunyemi's Black Womanism, Chioma Opara's Femalism, and Omolara Ogundipe-Lesilie's Stiwanism (an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), at the heart of all African womanist/feminist theories is the concept of gender complemantarity or cooperation. What unites African mediated female theories is that unlike the Western model of feminism that "at best is exclusively for women and, at worst, dedicated to attacking and eliminating men" they are formulated to cooperate with men (Azumurana, 23). For instance, an essential concept in Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism is negotiation and cooperation rather than confrontation (*Snail-Sense* 27). According to Ezeigbo herself:

> The theory (snail-sense feminism/womanism) derives from the habit of snails which most Nigerian women adopt in their relationship with men….The snail crawls over boundaries, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with a well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects….Moreover, the snail carries its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe….It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men that informs this theory which I call snail-sense feminism….It (the snail) does not confront objects but negotiates its way past (sic) any obstacle. (*Snail-sense* 27)

Also, when Toni Morrison in her Gynocriticism insists that she feels as deeply compassionate for males as she does for females, and that "race was more important to her than gender" (qtd in Elaine Showalter 449), she, like Ezeigbo points to some kind of cooperation between black women and men. Similarly, Alice Walker maintains that African Womanists are "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (quoted in Azumurana 23).

Also, Ogundipe-Lesile within the ambit of her STIWANISM posits that "Women have to participate as co-partners in social transformation. I think that feminism is the business of both men and women anywhere, and in Africa" (quoted in Azumurana 23). It then follows that what distinguishes African womanism/feminism in whatever garb is its reluctance to obliterate and eliminate the men folk. Rather, it advocates and encourages the cooperation between women and men for socio-political and socioeconomic development whether in the private or public sphere.

In her reading of Dorothea Schlegel's *Floretin,* Liesl Allingham observes that "Since gender complementarity excluded women from the public sphere, Schlegel's novel constructs alternative possibilities for female self-definition in the private sphere, in the process radically expanding the boundaries of the feminine private sphere" (26). This is not the case with the African feminist/womanist's oriented gender complementarity, especially as portrayed in Ngugi's novels. Women in both the public and private sphere cooperate with their men and achieve self-definition. Thus, they (the African women as symbolized by Ngugi's major female characters within the ambit of African feminism/womanism) do not accept gender boundaries in public space while rejecting it in the domestic front. Rather, they establish their self-definition in and outside the domestic sphere.

Gender Complementarity in Ngugi's Novels

It is with the deployment of the foregoing theoretical lens of African feminism/womanism that the gender complementarity in Ngugi's novels becomes poignant. Ngugi's feminist vision, in the true sense of the word, cannot be described otherwise than being Afrocentric. The pairing of his major female character(s) alongside their male counterparts unwaveringly run through all his novels, all the way from Mwihaki in *Weep Not Child* (1964), Mariamu in *River Between* (1965), Mumbi in *A Gain of Wheat* (1967), Nyakinyua in *Petals of Blood* (1977), Waringa in *Devil on the Cross* (1983), Guthera in *Matigari* (1986) to Nyawira in *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). While these pairings may look coincidental to many a hasty critic, this study insists that Ngugi's characterisation in his novels could not have resulted from desultory mental exercises but a deliberate design to underscore the inevitability of gender complementarity in the African society. This reinforces Florence Stratton's opinion in her book, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* that some male writers have written to correct the inherent gender biases for which African literature is known:

> Some men writers, 'men of good will' as Mariama Bâ would call them, have also attempted to transcend the sexual allegory and hence to resolve the problems of gender in ways that run counter to the biases embedded in the contemporary African male literary tradition. (158)

Ngugi is certainly one of these "men of good will" as is evident in the portrayal of women in his novels. However, his major female characters do not just transcend their sexual allegory for the fun of it or as a means of revolting against the men, but as a means of cooperating with their men for domestic and public socio-political and socioeconomic development/advancement.

It is instructive that Ngugi begins with the history of Kameno in *The River Between* which he traces to Gikuyu and Mumbi, the male and female primogenitors of the community, which to all intent and purposes is microcosmic of the larger Kenyan society. Whereas mainstream patriarchal narratives take into cognizance the existence of only men as the founding fathers of communities, Ngugi tries to show that a community cannot be built by men without the help of women. Thus, both men and women are expected to work hand in hand in a symbiotic relationship that does not only profit each other but in the progressive interest of the society they live in.

This fact is established in the words of Murungu in *The River Between* when he states, "This land I give to you, O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till, you and your posterity" (2, 148). This is reminiscent of God's blessing to humans as contained in the Bible's narrative of creation: "And God went on to create the man in his image...male and female he created them. Further, God blessed them, and...said to them 'Be fruitful and become many, fill the earth and subdue it, and have in subjection the fish of the sea and the flying creatures of the heavens and every living creature that is moving on the earth" (*New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* Genesis 1: 27-28). This blessing, in contrast to popular opinion, is not directed to the man alone, but to the man and woman. They are to complement each other in extending the boundaries of the garden in which they are put as well as subdue the earth to their own advantage and that of their unborn children. Likewise, in Ngugi's *The River Between,* the ruling and tilling of the land is not gender specific but collaborative – it is meant to be a cooperative effort for the benefit of all, men and women alike. This principle becomes the modus operandi

of the characters, not only in *The River Between* but also in Ngugi's later novels like *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood*.

For instance, Ngugi tells the story of the power of women in *A Grain of Wheat*, exemplifying the respect he accords his female characters. Ngugi makes allusion to the Queen of England and compares her rule to the historical era in Kenya when women ruled absolutely. Of this, Harish Narang says:

> With *A Grain of Wheat* Ngugi began a conscious attempt to not only create positively powerful women characters but he also began to make them more 'visible' by providing them with greater 'space' in his books. (84)

The "visible" and "greater' 'space'' the women have in these novels put them at par with their male counterparts even as they (females) never struggled to outwit them (males) in any matter. While the power of women in *The River Between* and *A Grain of Wheat* are first presented from a historical perspective, in *Petals of Blood*, Nyakinyua is the living history, connecting the Kenyan pre-colonial and colonial eras to the postcolonial era. She acts as a guide to the villagers in their preparation for a brighter future for Ilmorog. By this, Ngugi underscores the potentials in women to build the society with the support of men or in support of men.

The foregoing explicates why Ngugi's male and female characters in *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* work together in all circumstances. In *The River Between*, women are carried along in the circumcision ceremony which is one of the most important ceremonies in the Gikuyu/Kenyan society. It is the initiation ceremony into adulthood, which is equal to access to freedom, secret of the society, and full membership of the society. In short, it confers rights and responsibilities on the initiates – both girls and boys. The fact that this important ceremony is performed on boys and girls at the verge of adulthood speaks volume of the equal status Ngugi accords his male and female characters while equal participation of both parents in the ceremony tells us of the complementary role they play. For instance, in the case of Waiyaki in *The River Between*, he sits "between her [his mother's] thigh" (12) during circumcision, while Chege (Waiyaki's father) cannot take his son to the sacred groove, the hills and the forest until he undergoes the initiation supervised by his mother. The same holds for Muthoni for whom circumcision equals womanhood. She says, "look, please, I- I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real

woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges" (26). The knowledge of the origin and the ways of the tribe is not restricted to boys/men alone. It is to be acquired also by girls/women. This is because both of them (boys/men and girls/women) are equal partners in the socio-political and socioeconomic progress of their society.

In *A Grain of Wheat,* Ngugi further demonstrates the role of gender complementarity in advancing Thabai through the character of Wambui, the transformation agent in tandem with Omolara Ogundipe's 'Stiwanist orthodoxy.' All through the novel, her role as a woman brings the ability of women to the limelight as she partnered with men in the fight against colonial powers, a demonstration of "commitment from both sexes, not woman affair only as stressed in Womanism and Western feminism" (242).

Also, the portraitures of Nyakinyua and Wanja in *Petals of Blood* underscores the concept of African feminism in contrast with their western counterparts. While Wambui in *A Grain of Wheat* can be said to be an exemplary "Stiwanist," Wanja and Nyakinyua can be said to exhibit snail-sense feminist, Stiwanist and womanist traits. These characters are, in fact, the perfect paradigm of the African womanist figure who, in Alice Walker's words, is

> a 'black feminist or feminist of color' who loves other women and/or men sexually and/or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength and is committed to 'survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.' (xi)

The delegates sent to Mugo in *A Grain of Wheat* from the party to represent them do not exclude the presence of women. They are not the only voices sent to Mugo from the party (9), rather they are voices of both men and women. The novel records:

> Warui the elder, led the group. Standing beside him was Wambui, one of the women from the river. She now smiled, exposing a missing line of teeth in her lower jaw. The third man was Gikonyo, who had married Kihika's sister. (9)

It is significant that Gikonyo is described in relation to his wife (Kihika's sister), and not his wife in relation to him. This implies the importance and vitality of

Gikonyo's wife to his well-being. In other words, even though he is an important figure in the society, he is able to carry out his obligation through the support and partnership of his wife. Equally significant is the fact that Wambui is standing not behind Warui, but beside him – which implies that they are equal partners in progress.

Also, it is remarkable that it is Wambuithat gathered the women to persuade Mugo to speak as "Independence Day without him would be stale" (156). Wambui's philosophy adumbrates the core tenets of African feminism as she works with the men to make things done without usurping their authority. Wambui "believed in the power of women to influence events, especially where men had failed to act, or seemed indecisive" (157). Her role in the workers' strike is immediately brought to mind as it takes her drama to enforce compliance and participation in the strike since the men are inactive. Ngugi's omniscient narrator writes:

> Was there any circumcised man who felt water in the stomach at the sight of a white man? Women, she said had brought their Mithuru and Miengu to the platform. Let therefore such men, she jeered, come forward wear the women's skirts and aprons and give up their trousers to the women. Men sat rigidly in their seats and tried to laugh with the crowd to hide the inner discomfort. The next day all men stayed away from work. (157)

The scenario captured above is not a fight against patriarchy neither is it a competition of courage and power but a complementary effort. It is a move to destroy the oppression from their white bosses for both men and women which is the hallmark of Afrocentric feminism. As can be seen, the play dramatised by Wambui encourages the men to stay away from work, which is in itself a revolt against the oppression and exploitation of the Kenyan masses – both men and women.

Commitment of women to the wholeness of the society as demonstrated by Wambuiin *A Grain of Wheat* is at the crux of *Petals of Blood.* A little wonder that Ker complains of the fact that Wanja is portrayed as the driving force of Ilmorog (83), while Nyakinya is at the centre of every significant move in the novel being appropriately described as "mother of men." Ngugi does not place these female characters against or above their male counterparts in a manner of comparison and

contrast but he brings out their roles in conjunction with their male counterparts to stress the importance of gender complementarity. Mala Pandurang acutely captures this in what he described as Wanja's "selfless humanism" thus:

> Significant in Ngugi's portrait of Wanja is the amount of heroic energy packed into her tortured body, for in spite of the numerous violent experiences that have seared her psyche, she still emerges as an admirable character who exudes the most telling traits of selfless humanism. Orhow does one explain her offer to work as Abdulla's barmaid so that Joseph could start schooling? Or her self-sacrifice to the vulture Kimeria who wanted to possess her for only a few minutes, if only to save the life of Joseph during the trip to the city? (142)

The compassionate determination of Wanja to save a poor boy like Joseph could not have been possible were the narrative all about male-female tussle as is common with many mainstream feminist narratives. Hence, the answer to Pandurang's rhetorical posers can only be found within the ambience of gynocriticism and African womanism/feminism, which is committed to the survival of both women and men. In this context, Wanja hopes to build a better Kenyan society in collaboration with Abdulla by giving the Josephs of Ilmorog and by extension, Ilmorog community a better future for which Nyakinyua yearns. For Wanja, what she does to make this materialize matters less.

As it is with Wanja, so it can be said of all the major female characters in the novel as they all work with their men to move Ilmorog forward. Mariamu, for one, epitomizes the womanist portrait in her respectful disposition towards Ezekiel "but never afraid of him" (15). She is fondly remembered by Munira for the fact that "she would protest against low pay or failure to be paid on time where others trusted his father's word and his goodwill (15). This she does, not for personal interest but in the interest of both male and other female workers who are rather docile.

The newly independent Kenyan society in Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* faced the problem of neo-colonialism with Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria constituting the oppressive class in the narrative geography of the novel. It is instructive to note that without the cooperation of Wanja, the murder of these characters which is symbolic of the obliteration of the oppressive neo-colonial power would not have

been possible. This act, in practice, absolutely encapsulates the concept of feminist intersectionality which according to Patricia Hills Collins, denotes the cultural patterns of oppression which are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society, such as race, gender, class, and ethnicity (44) which cannot be handled separately or independently. The killing of Mzigo, Chui and Kimeria represents the end of intertwining oppression of the bourgeois and the political class in the newly independent Kenyan society which is more important to a gynocritic than gender.

Again, the idea of sending delegates to the city to meet the people's representative in *Petals of Blood* is only made possible through the advice of Nyakinyua. Although Njuguna opposes the trip initially, when he sees that Nyakinyua's advice is for the good of Ilmorog and that the young men and women seem to have acquiesced to her counsel, he submits to her opinion. The inclusion of women in the delegation and their active participation in the preparation for and in the actual trip shows how women in postcolonial Kenyan society work with their men to establish a classless society. Ngugi makes his narrator to write insightfully:

> From that moment, they forged a community spirit, fragile at first, but becoming stronger as they strove and made preparations for the journey. Women cook food for the journey, some draining their last grains. Others gave money they might have saved. Munira, Karega and Ruoro worked on the donkey-cart to make it ready for the great trek of the village to the city. (116)

Ilmorog is a community where there is no gender bias or binaries, or at least where it is not palpable since, even in its existence, it is tempered with balanced understanding. Nyakinyua is among the elders just as Wanja is among the youth and they both have a voice in matters affecting the community. In fact, "men, women, and children (are seen) taking part" (111) in the decision making process of the village. For Filomena Chioma Steady, such unbiased liberty enjoyed by all in *Petals of Blood* is the crux of African feminist literature (28).

While Ngugi's concern in *The River Between* is to portray the relevance of men and women in preserving the cultural heritage of Makuyu epitomized in the circumcision ceremony and their struggles against western traditions, his main project in *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* is to show the role of women in fighting against colonialism and neo-colonialism respectively. It is clear then that

The River Between, A Grain of Wheat and *Petals of Blood* typify the role of gender complementarity in communal and national agenda. The important leadership positions Ngugi accords female characters in the cultural and religious struggles in *The River Between* epitomized in Nyambura and Muthoni and the political struggles in *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* exemplified in Wambui on the one hand, and Nyakinya and Wanja on the other, refute Ogundipe-Leslie's claim in her essay, "African Women, Culture and Another Development" of women's natural exclusion from the political frontiers of African society:

> [w]omen are 'naturally' excluded from public affairs; they are viewed as unable to hold positions of responsibility, rule men or even be visible when serious matters of state and society are being discussed. Women are viewed to need tutelage before they can be politically active; politics is considered the absolute realm of men; women are not considered fit for political positions in modern African nation states, though their enthusiasm and campaign work are exploited by their various political parties. (130)

What Ogundipe-Leslie notes is not true of Ngugi's female characters in the novels under study. Ngugi accords his female characters as much societal responsibilities as his male characters.

Another area of gender complementarity that demands adequate attention in the context of this study is the aspect of interpersonal relationship represented by marriage and comradeship. Ngugi seems to be in agreement with Maria ma Ba in the three novels under consideration by stressing the inevitability of marital relationship and cooperation between man and woman in the African society. Ba, like Ngugi, through her ideal womanist/snail sense character, Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* believes that true happiness is entrenched in the marriage of a man and woman who complement each other. Ramatoulaye in a letter to Aissatou, a younger, more radical character, writes:

> I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage. (55-6)

She continues:

> I am indifferent to irreversible currents of women liberation that are lashing the worlds…My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquests difficult: social constraints are ever present and male egoism resist … *I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarities of a man and woman.* (88, emphasis ours)

The African womanist philosophy quoted above, coupled with Catherine Acholonu's motherist ideology is, perhaps, what informs Miriamu's obsequious disposition towards Joshua, her husband. She accepts her husband's authority absolutely just to avoid "unnecessary tension in the house" (34). She learns what it means to be a mother by "bearing on her shoulders all the sins and the misdeeds of the children," (34) a responsibility from which she, as an African woman, cannot shy away, thereby exemplifying Acholonu's concept of Motherism. In fact, it is the "motherist concerns"(244) to borrow Alkali's words or the consideration for the child that holds the African woman back every inch in her decision on the uncomfortable patriarchal home." (245)

Being a mother for an African woman, therefore, is to develop that large-heartedness that forbears and forgives all, always fighting for the unity of the home, the microcosm of the society. Acholonu provides a deeper insight into her theory/concept of motherism in her personification of Africa as the Mother Continent from the global perspective. In her book, *Motherism - An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism,* she says that motherism is

> anchored on the matrix of *motherhood* ... Whatever Africa's role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from … the Mother Continent of humanity, nor is it coincidental that motherhood has remained the central focus of African art, African literature…(3)

Thus, Miriamu's injunction to her children as part of her motherly role is "Obey your father" and she leads by example. This is further elaborated in the advice of Waiyaki's mother to him in *The River Between*. The voice of Kiama represents the voice of her late husband, Chege and her son should know the consequences

of disobeying it. She cautions, "You must not do it. Fear the voice of the Kiama. It is the voice of the people. When the breath of the people turns against you, it is the greatest curse you can ever get"(123).This shows that, as mothers, African women do not only nurture their children, they also nurture the society and they jealously guard against anything that threatens to separate them from such duties. This also demonstrates how intertwined the African models of feminist theories are. In fact, it can be argued at this point that the difference in all African mediated feminism basically lies in their nomenclature which can be said to be what Homi K. Bhabha refers to as ―"a process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference" (4)between them with similar objectives in practice.

A Grain of Wheat provides more insightful revelations on the concept of gender complementarity in marriages. While a mainstream feminist critic will conclude that Wangari left her husband in quest for independence or as a protest against patriarchy, this paper insists that her departure was against her will, as she does all she can to keep the family together. She decides to stick to her husband no matter what comes her way until Waruhiu, her husband orders her out. The novel relates that Waruhiu,

> beat her, hoping that this would drive her away. Wangari stuck on. Eventually, Waruhiu ordered her to leave his home and cursed mother and son to a life of ever-wandering on God's earth. (70)

It is even more instructive to note that Wangari does not abandon his son, Gikonyo. She takes him and trains him to adulthood, because, she cannot stand the sight of being separated from him as an African mother that she is.

Again, Ngugi tells us of Munoya's father in *A Grain of Wheat* who "would come home drunk to drum the boy's mother with fists." (184). Even at this, Munoya's mother still stays because her happiness is in being "part of a couple." In fact, when Munoya attempts helping her by fighting his father, she turns against her son. She still has respect for her husband in spite of his irrational behaviour. Thus, she like a snail crawls over boundaries, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently without being destroyed with the intention of arriving the destination of her marital relationship without separation (Ezeigbo, 27). Ngugi's narrator observes:

> Father and son were locked in a life-and-death struggle... The woman took a stick and fought on

> her husband's side. It was Munoya who now turned numb with unbelief. *'He is your father and my husband,*' she was shouting as she felled a blow on his shoulder. (184 -5, our emphasis)

Correspondingly, Wanjiku expresses surprise over the return of Mumbi after her quarrels with her husband. While Wangari, Gikonyo's mother never supported the action of her son, Mumbi's mother also does not expect her daughter to return home for being beaten or called a whore by her husband. It looks strange to her since in their time "a woman could take blow and blow from her husband without a thought of running back to her parents" (181). Mumbi's return from her father's house to Gikonyo in the hospital on hearing that he has a broken arm explains clearly that her decision to leave for her father's house is a temporary one, a mechanism for allowing the steam of her husband's anger to cool down before she returns; it is not a sue for divorce. This again is the hallmark of African feminism.

In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja's aunt supplies arms to her husband, a hard-core Mau Mau. Ezekiel commends Julia for being a "good woman," who remains loyal to Munira who ran away to a place whose name cannot be mentioned (94). No woman in the narratives under consideration leaves her husband as a protest against patriarchy. If there is a case of separation, it is engendered by quest for respite which does not erode the respect they have for the man whose house they left.

The foregoing are viable proofs that women in *The River Between, A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* are not combating patriarchy nor is there sufficient evidence to suggest so; they are instead, in collaboration with their men, fighting against westernization in *River Between,* colonialism in *A Grain of Wheat* and neo-colonialism in *Petals of Blood,* and this is suggestive of the resilience of women in building a better society for humankind. It is therefore safe to assert that Nyambura and Muthoni in *The River Between* are not mutinous against the personality of Joshua, their father as it is easily held among critics. Nyambura's open decision to go with Waiyaki is a "battle" for unity and resolution of the ensuing religious clash in the ridges. Her bold acceptance of Waiyaki in the presence of her father becomes the only bridge on which reconciliation can ply while Muthoni's decision to be circumcised is a move to preserve her cultural heritage which her father's blind zeal is gradually eroding.

In *A Grain of Wheat*, women join hands with men to end colonialism. They have secret dreams of making their husbands happy by complementing their efforts in the fight against their common enemy, colonialism. Mumbi expresses her dream adumbrating Omolara Ogundipe's model of STIWANISM or STIWA for short, an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa thus:

> I also prepared myself to stand by him when the time came. Icould carry his sheath and as fast he shot into the enemy, I would feed him with arrows. If danger came and he fell, he would fall into my arms and I would bring him home safely to myself. (120)

Njeri on her part joins Kihika in the forest "to fight at Kihika's side" (121). It is enlightening to know that Njeri "was shot dead in the battle, soon after Kihika's death" (121) while Wambui contributes immensely to the success of the fight against colonialism by sharing "secrets from the villages to the forest and back to the villages and towns" (19) and occasionally supplying arms to the fighters in the forest. On the premise of these scenarios, it is compellingly clear that patriarchy is not in the agenda of these women as colonial power is.

Congruently, it is clear from the forgoing that Ngugi employs stiwanism in delineating his female characters in the novels under consideration. Ogundipe's stiwanism is anchored on partnership between males and females in transforming the society, an idea which according to *Muhammad Alkali, et al*, is neither recognised by Western feminism nor is it the concentration of Western womanism (242). Of "Stiwanism," Ogundipe-Leslie remarks:

> I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It's not about warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest. (1)

In consistence with Ngugi's Afrocentric ideology, the women in *River Between* and *A Grain of Whea*t are not different from the ones in *Petals of Blood* regardless of the changes in time and government. This implies that women in *Petals of Blood* as in the other novels cooperate with men in building a "harmonious

society" for everyone. Ngugi through the eyes of history draws a point of symmetry between Wambui in *A Grain of Wheat* and Wanja's aunt in *Petals of Blood* who "used to carry guns and bullets to the forest hidden in baskets full of unga" (65). Although the other women in *Petals of Blood* do not carry gun, they are actively involved in putting an end to neo-colonial power. From the delegation to the city to the death of Chui, Mzigo and Kimeria, women have shown that they are active agents of transformation in a society in dire need of change. This finds justification in Lessile's claim that transformation is "the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest" (1). Wanja's involvement in the killing of the trio mentioned above is not a revenge for violating her, for at least it is a common knowledge that Karega, Munira and Abdulla had all slept with her severally, but a means of eliminating the symbol of neocolonialism which they represent and against which the peasants fight.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Filomina Chioma Steady provides an all inclusive definition of African feminism, one that harmonizes the nuances in the African feminist theories. She defines, "African feminism as emphasizing female autonomy and co-operation; nature over culture; the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship" (28). This definition adumbrates the basic tenet(s) of all Afrian-mediated feminist theories ranging from Snail-sense feminism, Gynocriticism, Womanism, Clenora African Womanism, Black Womanism to Stiwanism.

Consequently, although *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat* and *Petals of Blood* are novels written in different historical periods and representing different stages in the historical development of Kenyan society, Ngugi maintains a consistent parallelism in the African feminist ideology that runs through them. Ngugi presents how African women, subtly apply a quiet energy imbued in them by nature which makes them triumph over their men "without looking fierce and muscular" (Nwamadi, 242). With the space they secured in the society, the women collaborate with men in achieving the collective goal of nation building, transformation, and liberation for all.

In fact, the central role Ngugi accords his female characters demonstrates the depth, strength and loyalty imbued in African feminism which Walker compares with purple (xii). The women successfully stamped their authority in the society without necessarily divorcing or being at loggerheads with men; they worked with men to make their goals easier. This is the crux of African feminist ideology.

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