

Stories of women and mothers: gender and nationalism in the early fiction of Flora Nwapa

When the baby was five days old, Ajanupu told her sister that it was time to put alligator pepper in her mouth so that her tongue will be free. If this was not done, Ajanupu said, the baby might be deaf and dumb. So early the next morning, some alligator pepper was brought and Ajanupu chewed it very well and then put it under the tongue of the baby. The baby yelled and yelled. She was quickly breast-fed, and she stopped crying.

'Ajanupu, my daughter will talk like you. I am afraid she will be very talkative.' Efuru's mother-in-law teased her sister.

'That is all right. Aren't you lucky that I am near to put alligator pepper in her mouth? Who wants to be quiet these days? Don't you know that if you don't lick your mouth the harmattan will lick it for you. You stay there and talk of being quiet these days.' (Flora Nwapa, *Efuru*)¹

She is there at the beginning of the lives of individuals and of nations. In nationalist and pan-nationalist mythologies and, more recently, too, in the matriarchal yearnings of historically dispossessed women seeking their own place in tradition and history, mother figures cradle their children in comforting and capacious laps. Symptomatically, in the period before and immediately after Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, his then wife and at the time celebrated consort Winnie Mandela (now Madizikela-Mandela) was given the laudatory title 'Mother of the Nation'.

Elsewhere, as has been seen, mother figures bulk large in nationalist imaginings. By way of a cross-national encapsulation of what has been seen so far, the Caribbean poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite has addressed his home island of Barbados as 'mother', the matrix of this connection with the past, the source of meaning and identity.² In his writings on India, such as his *An Autobiography* (1936) and *The Discovery of India* (1946), as the previous chapter showed, Jawaharlal Nehru idealises and feminises India as an age-old, at once distant and exacting yet nurturing maternal presence.³ Mehboob Khan's much-discussed 1957 film *Mother India* definitively represents India as

heroic mother. The Somalian Nuruddin Farah has commented that referring to a nation as a father- (rather than as a mother-) land is to him an absurd idea.⁴ Many post-independence male writers from across Africa – Camara Laye, Kofi Awoonor and Wole Soyinka among them – speaking from various historical and regional perspectives, have seen the image writ larger, within a pan-nationalist framework: Africa, the entire continent, whole and full-bellied, is both the beloved land and mother. In 1988, when making a call to Africans to stand together on the basis not of colour but of Africanness, Jesse Jackson adopted this grand trope, urging that African people everywhere ‘identify with Africa as . . . mother continent’. His conviction was that ‘the blood that unites us is stronger than the water that divides us’, a politically motivated metaphor knitting together images of common womb and origin, and of shared birth ground.⁵

Although they perhaps hold different sentiments and ideals in this regard, the figure of the common national mother is, significantly, one to which post-independence women writing from Africa and India have also paid their respects. Buchi Emecheta, the London-based, Nigerian-origin novelist, for example, once expressed the opinion that ‘the white female intellectual may still have to come to the womb of Mother Africa to re-learn how to be a woman’.⁶ For the Zimbabwean poet and former guerrilla fighter Freedom Nyamubaya, writing in the 1980s, to speak of the Zimbabwean nation is to speak of the motherland. To her the concepts knit together so tightly that she bestows upon the concept of freedom the same honorific title: ‘mother freedom’.⁷ Despite her acerbic criticisms of the postcolonial Indian nation, the Indian activist writer Arundhati Roy in her polemical essays follows Nehru in so far as she, too, addresses her country as (a wronged yet still noble) ‘she’.⁸ Indira Gandhi, Nehru’s daughter, herself infamously elaborated on the woman = nation equation with her slogan ‘India is Indira’. Speaking from an African American perspective the poet and activist Aneb Kgotsile observes: ‘Mother Africa is of great importance . . . Through our study of African history the motherland was unearthed to us and we reclaimed Africa’.⁹ In her schematic novel *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), Alice Walker sings threnodies over the destruction of the ancient matriarchal worship of Africa: history in Walker’s representation achieves meaning in so far as her characters become either avatars or acolytes of the composite, omni-benevolent ‘Africa/Mother/Goddess’.¹⁰

But to what sort of mother image is it that women writers appeal when they speak in this way? Is their gaze fixed longingly on the same object as their male counterparts? Does the icon represent for them a simple reversal within the vocabulary of a male-dominated nationalism, and, if so, what does this reversal mean for their own strategies of self-retrieval via the mother image? Do nationalist vocabularies not implicate women in certain paradoxes of identity

and affiliation? How, straightforwardly put, are they to legitimate themselves in national terms when the legitimating symbolic traditions of the nation tend to admit them as stereotypes, not as full citizens? In theory, and rhetorically, anti-colonial, nationalist movements made provision for the self-representation of women, yet did women's roles within the post-independence nation-state in practice have an equivalent status to those of men? Such questions point to the main concern of this chapter, which will explore how an investment in a typically masculine nationalist imaginary impacts on women's politics of self-realisation and on their involvement in the modern nation-state. Thereafter, in a reading of Flora Nwapa's early fiction, suggestions will be made as to what an alternative symbolisation of women's identity and language might entail.

In a nutshell, the dilemma is that where male nationalists have claimed, won and ruled the motherland, as has generally been the case across the post-independence world, this same motherland may not signify 'home' or 'source' to women, or does so in significantly different ways. Registering an acute discomfort with the male glorification of African women as national and continental mothers, Mariama Bâ once wrote: 'We women no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African mother whom, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa'.¹¹ The South African nationalist and woman of letters Lauretta Ngcobo analyses this seemingly hypocritical idealisation in terms of the traditional and (apparently) transcultural split of 'real' as against ideal women. 'Africa holds two contradictory views of woman', she writes, 'the idealised, if not the idolised mother, and the female reality of woman as wife'.¹² In post-independence India, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan observes, women in positions of political authority have been conceptualised predominantly in stereotypical 'good mother-bad mother' terms.¹³ (This widely prevalent tendency is, incidentally, as Sunder Rajan recognises, exacerbated across the world by the relative lack of an adequate gender theory of political power for women.)

As is clear from this sampling, to Third World women as well as to historically dispossessed women in the west, issues of at once identification with, yet exclusion from, a nationalist tradition of masculinised self-assertion speak with particular urgency. Women encounter the strong need to resist the compounded oppressions of colonialism, gender, race, class, sexuality, etc., and find at the same time that tactics of self-representation are often usefully adopted from the more established and yet compromising nationalist politics of their male counterparts. Indeed, as Kumari Jayawardena has shown, anti-imperial, nationalist struggles in many parts of the world historically gave birth to (usually middle-class) feminist movements.¹⁴ Yet, even so, the exclusions imposed on women by the independent nation, especially by those nationalist brothers concerned to police cultural authenticity and purity after colonialism, mean that many postcolonial women have, as the so-called bearers of cultural tradition, been denied their entitlements as modern citizens. Some women

might therefore continue rightly to feel, along with Virginia Woolf in her famous anti-patriarchal pacifist manifesto *Three Guineas* (1938), ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country’.¹⁵ Because men have drawn up, defined and directed national boundaries and national affairs, as Woolf suggests, women cannot legitimately lay claim either to a national territory or to their own national mythology, history or theory of power. The lap of the Mother Nation may not be as soft and capacious for women as it is for men.

As has already been demonstrated in this book, despite its professed ideals nationalism does not address all individuals equally: significant distinctions and discriminations are made along gendered (as also class, racial, regional and other) lines. Such distinctions are not merely superficial. On the contrary, as in the chapter on Ngugi, nationalism, whether as ideology or as political movement, configures and consolidates itself through a variety of deeply embedded gender-specific structures. The idea of nationhood bears a masculine identity although some national ideals may wear a feminine face. Such gender tags are clearly illustrated, for example, in the iconographies the nation cherishes. In the literature, rhetoric and pageantry of nations, as in nationalist politics and political structures, it is a male figure who is traditionally cast as the author and subject of the nation – as faithful soldier, citizen-hero and statesman. In the national family drama that has the achievement of selfhood as its denouement, it is he who is the chief actor and hero. The mother figure in this drama may be his mentor, fetish or talisman, but advice and example are taken from a heritage – an affiliative line, as Edward Said puts it – of father figures.¹⁶

In short, typically therefore, the male role in the nationalist scenario may be characterised, as throughout this book, as metonymic. Male figures are brothers and equals, or fathers and sons and thus rivals; but in both cases their roles are specific, either horizontally positioned, or in some way contiguous with one another. The female, in contrast, as was seen in the case of the national leader’s autobiography, puts in an appearance chiefly in a metaphoric or symbolic role. She is the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch – but it is a role that vertically elevates and so excludes her from the sphere of public national life. Figures of mothers of the nation are everywhere emblazoned, therefore, but the presence of women in the nation has in many cases been officially marginalised and ignored. In the representative case of nationalist Ireland, for example, a rhetoric of martyrdom, as in the build-up to the 1916 Easter Rising, encouraged son-sacrifice to the Mother, variously identified as Land, Nation and Church.¹⁷

In most post-independence nations, given the male presence rooted in the colonial state and, formerly, in indigenous patriarchal structures, it was predictable that a gender bias would persist within (neo)colonial nationalist parties, movements and other organisations well beyond the time of ‘freedom’.

Whether in literature, in law or in daily life, the national subject was in most cases implicitly or explicitly designated male. Despite the promises of independence, women were by and large left out of full national participation on an equal footing with men. Even where women fought for freedom alongside men, as in Algeria or Zimbabwe, national consciousness was authored and authorised by male leaders, Frantz Fanon's insightful reading of the Algerian struggle notwithstanding. Women ex-combatants were soon made to feel where they stood 'as women'. Mother Africa, Mother India, may have been declared free, but the mothers of India and Africa remained manifestly second-class citizens.

Little resistance to such processes of patrimonial derivation could be expected from within the ranks of the newly empowered. In the manichean allegory that typified the colonial power struggle, dominant 'true' power – that of the coloniser – had been characterised as rational, disciplined, assertive, masculine, whereas inertia, weakness, deviance, the disorderly, had been represented as feminine.¹⁸ In that nationalists were committed to rebuilding their shattered self-esteem, to 'selving', images signifying autonomy, force, will – and by implication, masculinity – were avidly promoted.¹⁹ So the new rulers might proclaim themselves as a rising strength, as self-determining, as powerful – and also as patriarchal and/or as one another's brothers. Seeking to step out of inherited allegorical roles, they would strive to avoid as far as possible 'negative' – that is, feminine – attributes. At the level of national iconography, it is true, colonial images of the land as invincible protectress or progenitress (Africa as Woman, as She; India as Mother) might be assimilated to local conventions of respect for the earth, domestic traditions and/or mothers. This ensured that national leaders granted some form of compensatory iconic recognition to the 'mothers of the nation' while simultaneously vouching for the cultural integrity of the whole national entity. Observe once again, however, that it is the 'sons' who are the authors of meaning: whether of 'tradition', or of present social realities; whether of their own self-image as national representatives or of the women they would presume to represent. Underlying gendered values remain intact.²⁰

The glad achievement of national selfhood therefore presented women with a conundrum. Such selving, with its emphasis on the male personality, effectively only confirmed in them a lack of self, their difference from national wholeness or essence. This difference, this alienation, represented, and still represents, an especially serious issue for the nationalisms of the south or Third World. For where, in nationalist rhetoric as in the official discourse of the state, masculine identity is normative, and where the female is often chiefly addressed as an idealised *carrier* of nationalist sons, woman as such lacks a valued or marked position. At least until very recently, nationalism has tended not to interpellate women as, in the first instance, *nationals*. The weighty presences of national mothers have overshadowed and disguised the actual absences of women in public national life.

This then means that a woman seeking to claim a place or an identity in most fields of national activity faces multiple perils of self-contradiction. Literature as a medium of self-expression offers a representative case. Within African nationalism, for instance, especially that of the immediate pre- and post-independence periods, writing provided the middle classes with an important source of national myth-making and dreaming. For a writer to be a nationalist, was to be that much more a worthy writer, as well as that much more self-assertively male – in relation to which equation the figure of woman was habitually regarded as the vehicle or medium of male creativity, as for example in Wole Soyinka's work. The circle of mutually reinforcing identities shut – and still shuts – women out.

A woman might choose to crack this ring of identity by attempting to repossess matriarchal myths. For some women the reclaimed myth of an age-old, long-suffering 'Afrika' – Walker's Africa/Goddess/Mother presiding over the '500, 000 years' of human history covered by *The Temple of My Familiar* – has continued to hold out much promise of communion and liberation. The South African dramatist Gcina Mhlope, for example, has expressed her loyalty to this mythical maternal entity, speaking of the 'Women of my country' as 'Mother Africa's loved daughters'.²¹ Motherhood remains closely linked to the configuration of African, Caribbean and South Asian women's identities in many of the sociocultural contexts they inhabit.²² Yet the problematic facing mother-oriented women is whether and how such apparently redemptive symbols might be separated from those which continue to shore up a system of gender-tagged national authority. After all, the idealisation and possible fetishisation of mother figures bears an uncanny resemblance to the monolithic aspects of male-centred nationalism, just as to the romanticisation of conquered land under colonialism. Subscribing to the unitary icon may therefore threaten to defeat women's objectives of affirming their own particular mode of being.

Given that men have to a large extent monopolised the field of nationalist identity and self-image, women have in many cases sought to evolve other strategies of selving – less unitary, more dispersed and multifarious, more alive to the contradictions involved in the process of self-making. The challenge is not only that the patriarchal roots and sources that inform nationalist images must be in some way confronted. It is also that it is necessary to explore forms of women's self-representation that would counterpoise the inherited symbolic languages of gender as well as the grand stories of the nation. In this, despite influential national traditions of male authorship, writing – experimental, exploratory, nuanced, ironic – holds out fruitful possibilities of redress. Fredric Jameson, speaking here as a Marxist, not as a 'Third World' critic, has referred to such redress as the 'restoration of an essentially dialogical . . . horizon'.²³

In the case of Africa, for instance, it is the case that, if literature in the past has constituted something of a nationalist and masculinist preserve, then,

simply by writing, women directly confront and face down the male prerogative. In writing, as many postcolonial women critics have by now recognised, women express their own reality, unsettle male-focused (and other exclusionary) narratives, and so question received notions of national character and experience. But writing is more than this, too. To write is not only to speak for one's place in the world. It is also to *make* one's own place and narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity. It is in effect to deploy what in another context might be called a typical nationalist strategy. As Simon Gikandi once put it: 'To write is to claim a text of one's own; textuality is an instrument of territorial possession . . . narrative is crucial to our discovery of selfhood'.²⁴

This idea of self-creation through narrative intersects with the Kristevan concept of excess in writing. Julia Kristeva observes, à propos of Barthes's criticism, that writing is transformative, operating through the displacement of what is already signified, bringing forth the not-yet-imagined and the transgressive.²⁵ Indebted to Bakhtin, yet concentrating on women's expression in particular, Kristeva maintains that language – the symbolic order, syntactic completion – is threatened by the irruption of the heterogeneous, the disorderly, the semiotic, that which lies outside language though is finally only conceivable within it. Such irruption, which for Kristeva constitutes the poetic, comes about, among other methods, through a process aptly demonstrated by Flora Nwapa, that is, 'transposition', the shift between literary and linguistic media that creates possibilities for polysemy. Through writing, through claiming a text – and a narrative territory – women sign into and at the same time subvert a nationalist narrative that has excluded them as negativity, as corporeal and unclean, or as impossibly idealised.

Possibilities for the disruption and/or transformation of a masculine nationalist text can therefore be seen to operate in two main ways in women's writing: the *textual* and the (broadly) *temporal/territorial*. The first occurs through the medium of the text, in the substance of the writing, and involves *interrupting* the language of official nationalist discourse and literature with a women's vocality. Nationhood is so bound up in textuality, in 'definitive' histories and official languages and mythologies, that to compose a substantially different kind of text, using vernacular, non-literary and phatic forms that are part of people's everyday experience, is already to challenge normative discourses of nationhood – even where, as in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), that discourse announces itself as always-already multivoiced. Moreover, as this suggests, these different forms of composition manifest, crucially, *within* the poetics of the text, as nuance, emphasis and ironic juxtaposition – disruption is not expressed merely at the level of externalised, 'protest' writing.

Yet, because national identity rests on received images of national history and topography, the second method of transformation is as important. It involves *changing the subjects* that have dominated the nationalist text – and

therefore questioning the centrality of the male-defined nation as *the* key historical player in the post-independence period. Where women tell the story of their own experience, they map their own geographical perspectives, scry their own history and so, necessarily, contest official representations of a nationalist reality. They implicitly – and in some cases explicitly – challenge the nation's definition of itself through territorial claims, through the reclamation of the past and the canonisation of heroes. At the same time they also lever the icons of heroes and national mothers from their dominant positions as mascots and symbols of the quintessential national experience.

Both these methods obviously correspond closely to techniques of literary subversion in which women writers have long been engaged. Yet where post-colonial literary narratives since the 1950s have centrally depended on nationalist ideas and themes – and so on gendered interpretations of social reality – such transgressive methods have particular relevance and impact.

The second part of this chapter will demonstrate how such techniques work in practice in a discussion of two early novels by the leading African woman novelist Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970). Published during the first decade of Nigerian independence, a time featuring robust and cocksure, if also embattled, nationalisms, Nwapa's novels represent the first narrative appearance from a woman on the broader Anglophone African literary stage. This in itself was a significant voicing, yet added to this was Nwapa's specific focus on women's community and colloquy in Igbo culture.

Flora Nwapa

Like Elechi Amadi or Nkem Nwankwo, her male counterparts of the first post-independence decade, Flora Nwapa wrote 'after Achebe', both chronologically and in terms of literary influence.²⁶ Like Amadi's, like Achebe's, Nwapa's narratives remember and recreate the Igbo village past in the colonial period. Period generalisations, however, tend to obscure the significant differences that exist between Nwapa and her male cohorts. Most obviously, Nwapa's fictions are situated outside traditional, male-centred narrative history. She chooses to engage neither with the manly adventures and public displays of patriarchal authority described by other writers from her community (emblematised in Achebe's *Okonkwo*), nor with the stylistic conventions of their accounts. Instead she concentrates, and at length, on what was apparently incidental or simply contextual to male action – domestic matters, the politics of intimacy, the grubby reality and drudgery of maternal experience. Nwapa's gender focus has demarcated an area of communal life that was elsewhere, in texts by male writers, forgotten, elided or ignored.

In both *Efuru* and *Idu*, Nwapa's interest is in the routines and rituals of everyday life specifically within women's compounds.²⁷ Women press into her

narratives as speakers, decision-makers, brokers of opinion and market prices, and unofficial jurors in their communities. But Nwapa's specific intervention as a writer goes beyond her interest in women subjects. What also distinguishes her work from that of her counterparts in the 'Igbo school' are the ways in which she has used choric language to dramatise and empower her representations. In this way she creates the effect of a women's verbal presence within her text, while at the same time bringing home her subject matter by evoking the vocality of women's everyday existence.

Nwapa's narrative style, in particular her reliance on conversational techniques, drew a certain amount of negative criticism from an early generation of post-independence critics.²⁸ It was deemed to be 'sociological', 'claustrophobic' and generally limited. The apparent lack of conventional novelistic complexity in *Efuru* and *Idu*, I would argue, however, far from being a deficiency, instead clears the space for the elaboration of another kind of narrative entirely – a highly verbalised, collective women's biography, 'transsubjective, anonymous', transgressive.²⁹ This narrative method bears comparison with the African American writer Zora Neale Hurston's recreation of porch-side comment and of gossip on the road.³⁰

The critics Florence Stratton and Susan Andrade have productively read *Efuru* as engaged in intertextual dialogue with, respectively, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), and with Buchi Emecheta's fiction.³¹ The precise, women-centred contribution represented by Nwapa's early work can perhaps be most effectively demonstrated, however, when set in dual contrast with, on the one hand, a contemporaneous historical narrative by Elechi Amadi and, on the other, Ifi Amadiume's anthropological account of women's roles in a Nigerian Igbo community. In his novel *The Great Ponds*, written in 1969, Elechi Amadi depicts Igbo villages as controlled by the forces of war, rumour and disease.³² Over war and rumour, it becomes clear, men hold undisputed sway; of disease, the gods decide, but they, like the village leaders, are all male.³³ As in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the story focuses on the male trials of strength and endurance exacted during times of community crisis, and, as with Achebe, *The Great Ponds* is not uncritical of the social values which may contribute to and exacerbate such crisis. (The hardships suffered by the village, for instance, call into question the ethical soundness of the male leaders' counsel and policies of governance.) Yet, unlike in Achebe, no locus of value is suggested which might form the rallying point of a new order: the male characters represent different types and gradations of manliness, but their actual position of authority is not called into question. It is consistent with the terms laid down by the novel that the women in the community form a completely marginal and passive group. Their existence is affirmed by the male subjects – they are desired, taken in marriage, captured as booty in male wars. From the point of view of the male hut in the compound, they are respected in so far as they fulfil their maternal function. For the rest, they are ignored.

Superficially, this arrangement would seem hardly to differ from conventional gender divisions of power and cultural space in the West African novel. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it appears that in Amadi the gender separation is perhaps even more pronounced. The physical distance of the gender groups and their extreme social and political non-equivalence, as well as the marginalisation of all feminine values, suggest that the groups may well be independently produced and regulated. It is this view of a society *radically* split by gender that allows Amadi in *The Great Ponds* to represent the male side of Igbo life as though it were not only normative and authoritative, but self-sufficient and entire.

Yet, the writer's individual bias aside, it does not necessarily follow that this sort of exclusivity signifies a lack of power or self-determination on the part of women. It may equally be the case that the distance between the genders signifies and makes possible autonomy and social validity for women. The women have jurisdiction over an area of social life which, though separate, is only *apparently* marginal: women conduct the business of their lives convinced of the coherence and importance of their activity.

Contrary to appearances, the representations of writers such as Amadi and Achebe, rather than defining the whole compass of the Igbo world, describe only one section of it. That another, independent sphere of social existence exists is intimated only once, and then very briefly, in the Amadi text. It does, however, represent a significant break in the narrative when, in confrontational tones reminiscent of some of Nwapa's speakers, a senior wife, though nameless, comments on the folly of the current protracted war and its goals:

Why can't men take advice? . . . They think they are wise but they are as foolish as a baby in arms. Look at all the suffering of the past month. What good will that pond [the site of contention] do us?³⁴

Ifi Amadiume offers a corroborative perspective on the self-reliance of Igbo women, and on one of the chief conditions of that self-reliance – what might be called the mutual exclusivity of Igbo gender groups. In her study *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, she shows that women obtain a great deal of power in Igbo – and specifically Nnobi – society from the separation of gender and sex roles.³⁵ Amadiume does not always deal satisfactorily with the continuing predominance of *de facto* patriarchal authority in the community – and the status commanded by the roles of son and husband. Yet she does present evidence not simply for the existence of a clearly demarcated women's 'sphere' (which, however, says relatively little), but also for the independence and self-coherence of women's lives within that sphere. She indicates that in precolonial times political and economic roles, as well as compound space and village ground, were divided according to conventional sex dualities, with family units being matri-centric. She argues, however, that these socially constructed

dualities were mediated by the cross-gender roles available to women. Women were thus granted a range of powers with the appeal to Idemili, the water goddess, as offering the highest sanction of their authority.

It is this autonomous, self-validating women's world delineated by Amadiume that Nwapa embodies in *Efuru* and *Idu*. She extends the boundaries of the West African novel to include the women's side of the compound, a domain of village life which writers like Amadi neglected for reasons not of patriarchal lack of interest alone, but also perhaps of ignorance.³⁶ She decisively refracts the women's presence into her text through creating the conceit of women representing themselves in voice. Dialogue dominates in both novels, especially in *Idu*, as numbers of partly curious, partly phatic and frequently anonymous women's voices meet, interact with and 'call upon' or interpellate one another. This vocality, rambling and seemingly unstoppable, pulls against the confinements of the women's lives – their market rivalries, their anxieties about husbands, families and children. If, therefore, as Nwapa portrays it (though rarely overtly), male values in the society remain normative, women's talk can be interpreted not only as a way of life but as a mode of self-making.³⁷

It is a fact of course that the impression of the fullness and autonomy of women's lives Nwapa creates is qualified by the acquiescence on the part of the women characters in patriarchal views and values. Yet, at the same time, in their discourse, even as they speak, not only do the village women share their woes and confirm female bonds, they also translate their lives into a medium which they control. The reader is made privy to the women representing and, in effect, recreating their lives in dialogue. (Moreover, by concentrating on their need to please their husbands, and on problems of barrenness, their conversation reflects upon, objectifies, and so in some sense 'ring-fences', the social restrictions they experience.) The narrative result is that most of the (non-discursive) action in *Idu* and *Efuru* happens off-stage, and is more or less incidental to the 'spoken' text. Nwapa's writing is a decisive vindication of the congenital fault of garrulousness often attributed to 'the sex' (for example, in *The Great Ponds*, 23, 42, 25).³⁸ As *Idu* bemusedly observes: 'You know women's conversation never ends' (I 97).

How does this mode of verbal self-representation work in practice? *Efuru* and *Idu* unfold as conversations; both are loosely chronological, often digressive, and markedly lacking in the temporal frameworks of conventional narrative. *Efuru* begins at the time that the heroine marries Adizua without parental consent: 'one moonlit night' they make plans; the next Nkwo (market) day she moves to his house (E7). With this information in hand the gossipmongers can have their say and, sure enough, by the second page of the novel speculations are afoot regarding *Efuru*'s movements. These form the first soundings of that hum of conjecture that will run throughout the novel, commenting on the heroine's fortunes, her barrenness, her second marriage, her second barren-

ness. Against the background of this flow, market days, trade seasons, other moonlit nights, gestation periods, come and go with their accustomed regularity, but have significance in the conversational narrative largely as arbitrary starting points for new fragments of chatter. In *Idu* the verbal presence of the community would seem to be even more pervasive. Of the novel's 22 chapters, 14 including the first begin in mid-dialogue, and then usually in relation to events mentioned in some earlier conversation, the dialogue thus propagating itself across the pages of the novel.

The social setting Nwapa has chosen for her novels enables this self-generating orality. In each, the women occupy a self-enclosed, stable domestic domain: custom and environment are known to all the speakers, and few characters are unfamiliar. Where these may be physically gestured at or taken as understood, reference to external objects or to habitual activity is elided or abbreviated. From the non-Igbo reader's point of view, this is emphasised when in both novels Igbo words and concepts are left unexplained and cannot always be elucidated by context: *ganashi*, *obo*, *nsala* soup. The names for other referents are roughly transliterated: *a black stuff* (E 14), *the white disease* (E 48), *the small cough* (I 35). Within the village, the meanings of such phrases do not require elucidation. The insularity of the community is also suggested by the frequent repetitiveness of the conversation: comments are echoed, opinions reiterated, events retold. At times an anonymous speaker is brought into the conversation without any kind of formal introduction. The point of talking is often simply the interaction, confirming contact, and not an exchange of information. Or, as Uzoечи in *Idu* says: 'Sometimes, after discussing something, I like to come back to it and talk it over again' (I 29).

So much is action a function of what is spoken that, especially in *Idu*, 'plot' developments, such as they are, take place off-stage as the conversation passes. At one point in *Idu*, for example, Adiewere and Idu discuss 'their' troublesome new wife and think of sending her away; within a few pages it is announced that she has left for another man's house (I 49–50, 56). In chapter 13 of *Efuru*, Eneberi, Efuru's husband, expresses an interest in taking a new wife; in the next chapter, in the course of a chat between his mother and her friends, we learn that she has a new daughter-in-law (E 195). A particular state of affairs may thus change into its opposite within a few pages, in the course of a few fragments of dialogue: here Idu observes that the market is bad, there that it is good (I 45 and 47, 121 and 131). With dialogue constituting the main action, narrated or conversational time predominates over chronological time. Gossips summarise changes that have taken place over a span of years while also running through the community's opinion of these changes. One of the clearest examples of this occurs in *Efuru* when the heroine hears of her husband's desertion through overhearing gossip at the market (E 54–5, and also 208–9). The women's community lives through this propagation of its voices, this

telling of its stories. Even more so than their oral versatility, it is probably the sheer reiterative quality of the women's speech which impresses itself most upon the ear/eye – the ceaseless resumption of old complaints, the untiring return to familiar formulae, the echoic corroborative phrases (*I* 199, for example). In this respect the talk can be seen as self-reflexive: its repetitiveness forcefully communicates the unremitting routine of women's lives, the round of birthing, surviving and death.

Though Nwapa's dialogic approach (in the precise sense of the term) appears as the dominant feature of her narrative, its prominence should not detract from that important aspect of her writing which in fact enables the vocality of her style – her focus on women's affairs. Nwapa's women characters in *Efuru* and *Idu* represent themselves in voice, yet their spirit of pride and self-reliance is manifested also in the relative diversity of their quotidian activity.³⁹

Both novels document in some detail women's customs, business preoccupations and worries: certain sections, in particular the chapter on childbirth in *Efuru* (chapter 2), read as if they were extracts from an almanac of women's simples. By creating a sense of the fullness of Igbo women's lives in the colonial period, Nwapa begins to chart out the neglected, rural, gender dimension in the grand narrative of historical nationalist literature told by male writers. She questions, if mostly implicitly, the gender-bound space–time co-ordinates of that narrative. More specifically even than this, however, she delivers her riposte to a male-dominated nationalist tradition and its iconography of womanhood by making available for her women characters roles and symbols of identity which diverge from the mother stereotype. Her women characters are concerned about bearing children and being good mothers, yet their lives are not defined solely by their maternal function. Especially in *Efuru*, Nwapa delineates the 'clearly expressed female principle' in Igbo life where 'fecundity [is] important, not entire'.⁴⁰

Efuru opens with the heroine marrying without parental consent, defiant and unafraid. Later, when her husband proves unworthy, she leaves, as defiant. Though her action is more problematic, *Idu* ends with the heroine willing her own death so as to join her husband. She decides that the relationship provided by the marriage was more important to her than children. Both heroines are admittedly exceptional figures, yet it is important to note that they are not unique. Characters like the older woman Ajanupu in *Efuru* and the resolute Ojiugo in *Idu* exemplify comparable qualities of decisiveness, outspokenness and self-sufficiency.

In Igbo society, as Amadiume shows, it is in trade as much as in marriage and childbirth that women obtain power. Accordingly, putting into practice Nwapa's lifelong concern with economic independence for women, both novels focus on marketing as the chief dynamic of women's lives and the means whereby they obtain status (*I* 29; *E* 125). Attracted to the lure of a good reputation, women like

Efuru and Idu structure their lives around market days and keep a vigilant eye on profit. In this way, as well as through sheer audacity and hard labour, they develop the trading prowess for which the community respects them. Two important qualifications should perhaps be made here. One, that the economic abilities shown by Nwapa's women characters could be seen as compromised in her later writing where, in a capitalist, post-independence cash system, marketing heroines turn exploitative and conspicuously consumerist.⁴¹ And two, that while women command power through economic means, the patriarchal status quo is never challenged, even in matters of trade (for example, *E* 140–1).

It is primarily when women take on spiritual power, and therefore, according to convention, discard their sex roles, that they are able to enter a sphere where male authority has little effect. Nwapa's Woman of the Lake deity in *Idu* and especially *Efuru* bears a strong resemblance to the water goddess Idemili described by Amadiume. In Amadiume's account, women wield considerable power as the worshippers and representatives of this water spirit, also referred to as the Great Woman: ritual elites are based on her worship; successful market women are seen to be blessed by her.⁴² So too, in Nwapa, Uhamiri, the Woman of the Lake, is held in high regard, as are her followers. Although it may be her last resort as a barren wife, when Efuru is chosen at the end of the novel to represent the deity, this comes as a recognition of her status in the community and her success as a market woman. As infertility is a necessary condition of the goddess's chosen followers, Uhamiri's intercession gives Efuru's childlessness new, positive meaning – in a sense, makes it fruitful.

Where Amadi recognised only male deities, Nwapa in effect puts the community's shrines in order, setting the female goddess back in her rightful place. This readjustment reflects on what I have suggested is a powerful effect of her writing: that of counterbalancing in her use of language and in characterisation a postcolonial literary patriarchy and a matrifocal nationalism. In the crucial decade of the 1960s, Nwapa in *Idu* and *Efuru* re-angled the perspective laid down in male writing, showing where and in what ways women wield verbal and actual power. If nationalism is typically embodied in patriarchal formations and fraternal bonding, and involves the apparent exclusion of women from public life, then Nwapa, in choosing not to engage with 'big' national themes, in commenting on colonial history from the sidelines, dealt with that exclusion in two main ways. First, she effectively reproduced it – by situating her narratives in another place entirely; and then she converted that occlusion into a richness. By allowing a women's discourse apparently to articulate itself in her writing, she elaborates the text of Igbo national experience. Yet, even more importantly than this perhaps, she also uncovers the practical, *lived* reality of motherhood. She digs into the muddy, grainy underside of nationalism's privileged icon without undermining the importance of the institution of motherhood in West African culture. The mothers of Africa,

Nwapa shows, also have voices, anger, rival aspirations, their own lives to live. They are as much the worthy subjects of a communal history as are their nationalist sons.

Notes

- 1 Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* [1966] (London: Heinemann, 1987), p. 33.
- 2 (Edward) Kamau Brathwaite, *Mother Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). *Mother Poem* forms a trilogy with *Sun Poems* (1982) and *X/Self* (1986), also published by Oxford University Press.
- 3 Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* [1936], rev. edn (London: The Bodley Head, 1942), and *The Discovery of India* [1946] (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- 4 Nuruddin Farah, 'A combining of gifts: an interview', *Third World Quarterly*, 113 (July 1989), 180.
- 5 Cited in *West Africa*, 3729 (16–22 January 1989), 59–60.
- 6 Buchi Emecheta, *New Society* (4 September 1984), cited in Kathleen McCluskie and C. L. Innes, 'Women in African literature', *Wasafiri*, 8 (January 1988), 4.
- 7 Freedom T. V. Nyamubaya, *On the Road Again* (Harare: Zimbabwe Publishing House, 1986), pp. 3–4, 10–11.
- 8 See Arundhati Roy, *The Algebra of Infinite Justice* (London: Flamingo, 2002), throughout.
- 9 Cited in *West Africa*, 3721 (12–18 December 1988), 2324. The African American critic, Barbara Christian, too, has injected nationalist sentiments into her interpretation of images of African American and African motherhood in Alice Walker and Buchi Emecheta. Stressing the importance of the institution of African motherhood for cultural regeneration she observes: 'Motherhood provides an insight into the preciousness, the value of life, which is the cornerstone of the value of freedom'. See Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987), p. 247.
- 10 Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar* (London: The Women's Press, 1989). The quotation is from p. 63, but the remythologising occurs throughout.
- 11 Cited in Mineke Schipper (ed.), *Unheard Words*, trans. Barbara Potter Fasting (London: Allison and Busby, 1985), p. 50.
- 12 Lauretta Ngcobo, 'The African woman writer', in Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (eds), *A Double Colonization: Colonial and Postcolonial Women's Writing* (Aarhus: Dangaroo, 1986), p. 81.
- 13 Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).
- 14 Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Press, 1986).
- 15 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* [1938] (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), p. 125.
- 16 For Said's concept of modernism's affiliative relations, as opposed to filiative or cross-generational familial links, see 'Introduction: secular criticism', *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London: Faber, 1984), pp. 1–30.

- 17 See David Cairns and Shaun Richards, *Writing Ireland: Colonialism, Nationalism and Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Richard Kearney, *Myth and Motherland* (Belfast: Field Day Theatre Company, 1984); Clair Wills, *Improprieties: Politics and Sexuality in Northern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- 18 See Abdul JanMohamed's reading of the Fanonist (and Sartrean) concept of the manichean in 'The economy of the Manichean allegory: the function of racial difference in colonialist literature', in Henry Louis Gates Jr. (ed.), *'Race', Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 78–106; and also in his *Manichean Aesthetics* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983).
- 19 Consider, for example, the now canonical characterisation of the alienated, self-hating colonised in Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. C. L. Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1970), or Jean-Paul Sartre, *Black Orpheus* [1948], trans. S. W. Allen (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1976). On Indian effeminisation and the countering force of 'hyper-masculinity' under empire, see Ashis Nandy's groundbreaking *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); and Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
- 20 To modify slightly Simone de Beauvoir's words in *The Second Sex* [1949], trans. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 175: 'Representation of the [nation], like the [nation] itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth'.
- 21 Gcina Mhlope, 'We are at war', in Susan Brown (ed.), *LIP from South African Women* (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1983), pp. 159–60.
- 22 See Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender in African Women's Writing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 35; Filomena Steady (ed.), *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1981), p. 29. While the present study acknowledges the importance of motherhood and of mother figures to African and South Asian women, it also wishes to consider women writers' concerns with identities configured in contradistinction to the institution of motherhood.
- 23 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 87.
- 24 Simon Gikandi made this point as early as 'The politics and poetics of national formation: recent African writing', *ACLALS Triennial Conference* paper, University of Kent, Canterbury, 24–31 August 1989, pp. 1–20, and has interestingly elaborated it in his work since, as, for example, in *Reading Chinua Achebe* (London: James Currey, 1991). See also Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 25 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, trans. Léon S. Roudiez (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), in particular the essay, 'How does one speak to literature?', pp. 92–123.
- 26 See Bernth Lindfors, 'Introduction', in Bernth Lindfors and C. L. Innes (eds), *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* (London: Heinemann, 1979), pp. 5–6, for

- further comment on the 'School of Achebe'. Nwapa has been referred to, for example, as one of 'the sons of Achebe'.
- 27 Flora Nwapa, *Efuru*, and *Idu* [1970] (London: Heinemann, 1987). Page references will henceforth be cited in the text, along with the abbreviations *E* and *I*, respectively.
 - 28 For critical discussion of Nwapa's narrative strategies see: James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), pp. 80–1; Eldred D. Jones, 'Locale and universe', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 3 (1967), 127–31; Adeola A. James, 'Idu, Flora Nwapa,' *ALT*, 5 (1971), 150–3; Eustace Palmer, 'Elechi Amadi, *The Concubine* and Flora Nwapa, *Efuru*', *African Literature Today*, 1 (1969), 56–8; Kirsten Holst Petersen, 'Unpopular opinions: some African woman writers', in Holst Petersen and Rutherford, *A Double Colonization*, pp. 112–13; Oladele Taiwo, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 47.
 - 29 See Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, pp. 104–6. Nwapa's facility in creating the effect of conversation in text has been noted by other critics, including Lloyd Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1981), pp. 122–57, and, although he is patronising, Ernest N. Emenyonu, 'Who does Flora Nwapa write for?' *ALT*, 7 (1975), 28–33. Nwapa is on record for having said that the genesis of her writing could be traced to conversations overheard in her mother's sewing shop. See Jane Bryce-Okunlola, 'Motherhood as a metaphor for creativity', in Susheila Nasta (ed.), *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing* (London: The Women's Press, 1991), p. 204.
 - 30 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (London: Virago, 1987).
 - 31 See Florence Stratton, *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 80–107; Susan Z. Andrade, 'Rewriting history, motherhood and rebellion: naming an African women's literary tradition', *Research in African Literatures*, 21:1 (1990), 91–110.
 - 32 Elechi Amadi, *The Great Ponds* [1969] (London: Heinemann, 1982).
 - 33 The deity of earth and fertility who in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is female, is male in Amadi's pantheon. Then again, Achebe in this novel masculinises the water goddess.
 - 34 Amadi, *The Great Ponds*, p. 72. Relatedly, Carole Boyce Davies, 'Motherhood in the works of male and female Igbo writers', in Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (eds), *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), pp. 241–56, finds in the Chielo-Ezinma episode in *Things Fall Apart* the traces of a 'suppressed larger story'.
 - 35 Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed, 1987), in particular pp. 38–40, 52–3, 59–62, 64–7, 86, 111–14. As her later *Afrikan Matriarchal Foundations: The Igbo Case* (London: Karnak, 1987) also argues, Amadiume's thesis is that Nnobi – and Igbo – society, originally matriarchal, was invaded by a patriarchal people. Femaleness has therefore come to carry a stigma.
 - 36 On women's separate spaces, especially in West African culture, see Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), and *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (London: Croom Helm, 1981).

- 37 For instance, Nwapa's central women characters submit to the rule of callow husbands and to the 'circumcision' knife, and, in every case, take responsibility for their barrenness. See *Efuru*, pp. 53, 55, 63; *Idu*, p. 91. In her critical reading of the novels, Femi Nzegwu makes the different, if related, observation that the centrality of the institution of motherhood to Igbo social ordering is never questioned in Nwapa. Gender relations, she argues, existed in a situation of complementarity in African society before colonisation, and Nwapa is concerned to recognise this. See Femi Nzegwu, *Love, Motherhood and the African Heritage: The Legacy of Flora Nwapa* (Dakar: African Renaissance, 2001), for example pp. 43–4.
- 38 The practice of (always non-specialist) women *oriki* performers (or praise singers) in Yoruba culture offers a correlate for this mode of verbal self-representation by women. As the *oriki* medium is highly rule-bound, and is traditionally performed by men, women manipulate it in such a way as to make their mark upon it, to insert themselves within it. In particular, they use to their advantage the fragmentary or disjunctive nature of the appellations they inherit. See Karin Barber, 'Interpreting *oriki* as history and as literature', in Karin Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias (eds), *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1989), pp. 13–23; Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991). Nwapa's women speakers may not be professional oral artists, yet their verbal sufficiency bears comparison with that of the *oriki* artists. They, too, subscribe to patriarchal injunction, but at the same time succeed in representing and indeed promoting themselves through their use of language. In most cases this may happen through their sheer loquacity, yet like the *oriki* artists, they make inherited forms their own.
- 39 Amadiume's anthropological study *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* can be read as suggesting that Nwapa could have gone even further in representing the range of roles, activities and social positions available to women. In the event, her representations may have been constrained by the values she herself acquired as part of a Christian colonial education.
- 40 Davies and Graves (eds), *Ngambika*, pp. 243, 249; Amadiume, *Male Daughters*, p. 29.
- 41 The calculating materialism dramatised in the later stories belongs to an urban context where the restraining forces of village values and commentary are no longer available. The cut-throat individualism of a heroine such as Amaka in *One Is Enough* (Enugu: Tana, 1981), directly counters the collaborative choric harmonies of village community. Similar heroines people the pages of Nwapa's short story collections, *This is Lagos and Other Stories* (Enugu: Tana, 1986), and *Wives at War and Other Stories* (Enugu: Tana, 1984). Of this urban shift Nwapa observes: 'My heroines have changed because of the change in circumstances'. See Adeola James, 'Flora Nwapa', in *In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk* (London: James Currey, 1990), p. 115.
- 42 Amadiume, *Male Daughters*, pp. 42, 53–5, 102–3.