

A Feminist Perspective in Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor Stones*

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Abstract

Forna's *Ancestor Stones* is a feminist novel that seeks to rewrite the experiences of women in Africa in the feminist perspective. It also challenges the demeaning treatments and tendencies of the menfolk. Before today, women struggled to gain respect, recognition and societal independence in Africa because of the patriarchal society. Nowadays they are breaking the demeaning and stereotypical images that disturb their position and advancement. African women writers took to the stage in fulfilment of that goal. Aminatta Forna, a Sierra Leonean writer is among the women writers who have chosen to rewrite their story. The voice we heard in her work in rewriting the women experience is the feminist voice. *Ancestor Stones* is a classic example of rewriting women's experience in a feminist perspective. Thus, this paper scrutinizes thoroughly women's intellectual ability and assertiveness from a feminist perspective in Forna's *Ancestor Stones*. It seeks to view the institution of polygyny and how it is perceived by both the older and the twenty first generation of the African women. The research paper concludes that the twenty first century women are radical and uncompromising while the older generation is assertive but belongs to nego-feminism and seek to embrace polygyny.

Keywords

Feminism, Polygyny, Patriarchal, Women Literature, Perspective

1. Introduction

Forna is a Sierra Leonean novelist who was born in 1964 in Glasgow, Scotland, to a Sierra Leonean father and a Scottish mother. Following the death of her father who was hanged for treason, Forna went to live with her mother in Scotland. In her childhood Forna, spent much of her time in Freetown, Sierra Leone,

with the extended families. Her experience and perspective about the African and Sierra Leonean woman are born and nurtured by her relatives where she received endless stories about patriarchal society, co-wifery, traditional religion and the incursion of Islam and Christianity into Sierra Leone. Forna divides her life between London and Sierra Leone.

Aminatta Forna is a distinguished contemporary female writer who has written extensively about the subjugation of women in the African society. She has authored many works that speak about women subjugation and the suppression of women in Sierra Leone and Africa. She is the author of *Ancestor Stones* (2006), *the Memory of Love* (2010), *the Devil that Danced on the Water* (2003). Forna has been affected by past memories and that spurred her to write her novels that tell about her memories and diverse events about her life and her family. She is a brilliant writer who writes on diversified themes but the feminist perspective theory is pertinent in her literature. She has written extensively about the effect of the Sierra Leonean Civil War on the women's views to inherited things like "Ancestor Stones".

Forna is a master and classic writer in writing women's experiences. She has a unique inner method in her way of writing addressing the women psyche. She is analysing it with careful sensitivity. She simply shapes her deep understanding of women's sufferance in Africa. In *Ancestor Stones* and her other novels, she shows her literary might in the corpus of writing penmanship. *The Ancestor Stones* has contemporary relevance because it concerns with issues that represent the contemporary reality of African black women. Forna's writing has joined the troop of African women's literature which is also referred to as the feminist literature. In the 19th Century, more women actively participated in African Society's reformist movement against colonialism. This led to what is called "women literature". These women writers are concerned with scrutinizing Africa, its cultures and the experiences of the women through feminist perspective (Bouziani, 2015).

Feminist writing is the insistence on expressing women's point of view about their own lives and the way they want to live. Before now, men dominated African literature because women have no chance and shy to express their views or engaging in education. Feminist writing is to place women in a strong position of authority in their lives and experiences, to appreciate and believe women's voices. The African women writers demonstrate that women are no longer shy, afraid and willing prey or victim of male prejudices of oppression (Hadjitheodorou, 1999).

As a literary movement, feminism in African literature has a tradition in bringing about change in society and how women are dehumanized. The philosophy is about equity and equality in society. African women's writers focus on the emancipation of women (Chukwma, 1994). Forna's female characters are not those presented by Chinua Achebe or other male chauvinist writer as merely sex symbol-inferior beings who should be under the control of men, but rather as an audacious, assertive, courageous and self-reliant woman.

Feminists have always been concerned with the image of women in literature. Criticism of the images of women helps to facilitate the understanding of how female characters are presented in literary works. Feminist criticism, contrary to male literature, propagates a positive image of women, promoting women's writings and personhood (Butler, 1990). The feminist movement is both a movement which aims to re-evaluate the devaluated image of females through literature. Since literature is the mirror that reflects the entwined practical realities of a society (be it cultural, religious, political, economic, or what it may), feminist literary criticism is a weapon used to disclose the underlying gender biased human constructs through the portrayed female characters of multifaceted literary genres. The African literature denounces the wrong image of female among different societies of the continent.

Woman is considered as a factor of impact and influence in many level; social life, relationships, career, and sense of self-worth...she is the basic formation of families, communities and even nations (Gordon, 1990). From this standpoint, I find that a woman has a significant impact on the continuing human offspring and also has a role in the development of the areas of human life, let it be politically, socially, culturally....

Through education and enlightenment, African women started to question some of the injustices and marginalization of women, and with the ideology of feminism, they started to write against it and raise people's consciousness about it. Knowing that women's experiences of patriarchy differ, African women were able to create feminisms that reflect their unique experiences, and use this as a tool to demand for change that is equitable to both sexes (James, 1990). The African woman's response to feminism finds an echo with other black women's response. They were able to adapt it to their particular experiences of marginalization and inequality, and formulate theories and concepts to address the gendered ills. These theories also provide the necessary tools and strategies for self-rediscovery, emancipation and actualization from every form of injustice and subjugation.

The African society has never been equal in terms of gender relations. African belief systems and cultural traditions favour boys and men being at the helm of affairs in both the private and public spheres. This plays out in male preference, early marriage/motherhood of girls, restricted formal education, restricted leadership positions, amongst other ills. These contribute to give women a low status and low self-esteem, which play out in demeaning ways. African feminists are working hard at creating a more equitable society where everyone, boy and girl, man and woman, is open to equal opportunities and possibilities (Bouziani, 2015).

Forna's novels are out-spoken. And she is known for her bold views that are reflected in her novels. Like Forná, a number of African women novelists have the ability to convey the messages of feminism in the African way. The womanistic manifestation of Aminatta Forná in her various works provide an exploring sight of Forná's novels. Her works are inspired by what happened in Sierra

Leone. She gets her inspiration from the war in Sierra Leone. She wrote about what happened in the war and sufferings of people especially the women in *Ancestor Stones*. She focuses on family, polygyny and the feminist perspective. She wrote about corruption in Sierra Leone. The War in Sierra Leone lasted from March 1991 to January 2002, when a group of rebels withdraws by the Liberian Leader Charles Taylor invaded the Country from Liberia. The United Nations Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) declares the end of the War in Sierra Leone. The brutality of the War has been widely recorded. It involved terrible and often bloody atrocities on all sides against civilians. These atrocities include widespread gang rape, execution, amputation of limbs, lips and ears, decapitation. Children were kidnapped to fight on all sides, and injected with drugs or given alcohol to give them courage. Criminal freed from prisons.

Ancestor Stones tells the story of an unnamed country in West Africa. The story is about four sisters. The mesmerizing tale told by the four half-sisters: Asana, Hawa, Mariama and Sarah. They are stones captures for several decades of Sierra Leonean history through the female eyes of one family. They establish a coffee plantation, through the disturbing crash and burn days of the recent civil war. The stones are an unflinching passage through history that expertly evokes the oral traditions and the unique rhythms of rural African life.

Ancestor Stones begins with the question; “ I was asking my stepmother what people in her village in Sierra Leone believed in before Christianity and Islam (...) The only thing that she could recall was about the stones” (Aminatta 12). Her Co-mother provided her with more details about those stones. She stated that her mother died because of her Muslim husband when arrived to house, he found her talking to stones them he drops them away. The mother got sick then she died. Forna claims that the story of the stones is true because she found a paper written by a Scottish missionary. The paper was about that area in Sierra Leone. The paper mentioned that women have stones that they worshiped and divine with. They represent their ancestors and each woman, on her death gives a stone to her daughter. Forna takes a breath. Then she realized that she wants that character and all these characters. She wants to explore the question of what are you doing to somebody when you just emptier their culture and identity.

2. Feminism and African Women’s Writing

African literature like other works of literature in the world devoted a part to the study of women and portrayed them in various profiles. Women’s position is immensely discussed in the contemporary literature. Women are seen as the donors of love, the protectors, the educators and contributors to nation building. The function of women has a considerable impact on many levels socially, politically, and in relationships, because women are mainstay of societies, families and nations (Mikell, 1997). In Africa, women are often are relegated to the background and decisions made by men without their consent. The marginalization and disempowerment of women are realities in the contemporary world, including Africa. The African society has never been equal in terms of gender

relations. Africa belief systems and cultural traditions favors boys and men being at the helm of affairs in both private and public spheres. This plays out in male preference, early marriage or motherhood of girls, restricted formal education, restricted leadership positions, amongst other ills (John, 1963). These contribute to give women a low status and low-esteem, which plays out in demeaning ways. African widows are without widowhood rights. The people's culture does not accord widows, female divorcee or single parents any rights or respect or sympathy. Women as victims of patriarchal oppression is no longer new in Africa's literary discourse, as seen the creative and critical wrings of women and men across all genres.

At first, African literature was written by men who were strongly affected by the patriarchal beliefs and norms of their society. Some feminists' critics believed that male francophone writers routinely portray their female characters in the stereotype of an oppressed and subjugated woman who has no efforts to shape her destiny or change the system that deprives, oppresses, and robs her dreams and ambitions. African male writers view women as "passive" characters with neither personality nor serious problems, accepting their faith with no serious attempt to emancipate themselves. Moreover, male-authored texts presented women as characters with no identity or story to be shared or embraced (Taiwo, 1967). Thus, African literature has been described as a fictitious patriarchal world because of those writers who always relegated women to the background. Male authored texts depicted African women as weak, obedient and ignorant individuals. This negative image about women provoked African women and especially writers. Writers like Aminatta Forna, Mariama Ba, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Buchi Emecheta and others use their literary works to change this wrongful picture. They decry the oppressive treatment of patriarchal societies and male practices. They endeavor to improve women's position by portraying understanding, helpful, and divergent female characters. These women were influenced by feminism to commence a rebellion to attain women emancipation.

Feminism is a term that highlights the gender relations between men and women in a given society. The social system in many societies is patriarchal, a system that upholds the dignity of the male sex. As a result of this, the belief, value system, state structures and institutions promote the male sex over the female. Therefore, gender relations are built on superior or inferior, weak or strong, negative or positive social dichotomy, which privilege men over women (Jackson & Jones, 2013). Generally, feminists are of the opinion that women's position in society has been structured to the advantage of man and detriment of women in all spheres of life. Feminism brings up all these in order to make people aware of the ills, and work towards a change that will make society equitable.

The movement of feminism played a major role in the process of human liberation, thus feminism as a movement was organized around the belief of social, economic and political equality of the sexes. Feminism seeks to highlight and to fight against oppression. Feminist theory is an outgrowth of the general move-

ment to empower women worldwide, it is theoretical structures that compose conviction about nature and the reasons for women's mistreatment and imbalance and that propose techniques for killing abuse and securing gender disparity. Therefore, the concept is to criticize the supremacy of men and to make women become equivalent to men. The goal of feminism is also to reinforce the importance of women and to bring about gender equality. Besides, it tends to bring about a change in the society especially on how women are treated; it tries to discourage discrimination and humiliation on women; it focuses its attention on emancipation of women (Jackson & Jones, 2013).

The history of feminist movements is usually grouped into three waves of protest: the first wave of feminism, the second wave of feminism and the third wave of feminism. These "waves" represent the period the particular brand of feminism started and more importantly, the ideologies, values, goals and strategies each of the waves represent. Particular feminists were very present in these periods, pushing forward the philosophy of the emancipation of women. It is important to note in spite of the "radical" arm of feminism, the ideology itself is not against men, nor is it calling for a new world order people by only women. It is not asking for replacement of patriarchy with matriarchy. Its consistent call is equality, respect and equity for both sexes (Jackson & Jones, 2013).

Feminism has been described as having many faces based on the fact that it varies with circumstances surrounding it which can be cultural or historical. But whatever the nuances, it will resolve around the gap between men and women. Other African would not want to be associated with the feminism as a concept and name: Ogunyemi is among the scholars that would not want to name a feminist but derived her own words. She prefers using "womanism". She posits that "Womanism", with its myriad manifestations, is therefore a renaissance that aims to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic, geographical, education, gender, ethical, class, religious, military and political differences (Ogunyemi, 1985). She maintains that "womanism" is black centered, it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom of women. Similarly, Alice Walker prefers to use womanism and defines it as "a black feminist or feminist of colour... committed to survival and wholesomeness of entire people, male and female... not a separatist, except periodically, for health...love struggle, loves the folk, love herself..." (Walker, 1984).

To end, Africa women faced an earnest dilemma in Africa. They were in a place where they have to choose between faithful to traditions or striving for equal rights with men. These female writers succeeded in gaining a prestigious importance in the contemporary African literary world. Their major objective has been the emancipation of African women from any kind of enslavement and prejudice imposed on them by traditions, norms, stereotypes, or any form of demonic beliefs that dominated the African Societies. They used their pens to study the African societies and to liberate women from all practices that would rob their freedom and set their roles at naught. Moreover, they endeavor through their literary works to enhance the power of their words in order to

bring the welfare of both genders in the African countries. Feminism, the widespread movement in Europe and America influenced them (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987).

3. Literature Review

The primary theme of feminist writings is the insistence on expressing women's point of view about their own lives and the way they want to live. In the past men dominated writing because women had no chance to express their views or engaging in education. The main purposes of feminist writing are to place women in a strong position of authority in their lives and experiences, to appreciate and believe women's voices. The African women writers demonstrate that women are no longer shy, afraid, and a willing prey or victim of male prejudices of oppression (Frank, 1987).

Forna has been at the forefront of interrogations of African identity formation and history nowadays. She is trying to fix the image of women in African Society based on real facts from the depth of society. She is practical and original in her presentation of ideas. She is conscious of any details and presents lively and assertive women characters (Hayette, 2020).

Forna's stories mostly are affected by past memories which led her to write biographies in the form of novels. These stories or novels chronicles about her experiences and family. Her themes are painfully taken from her childhood experience. She writes about the effect of Civil war in Sierra Leone and about tradition. She also writes about women and their predicaments in a male dominated society (Hayette, 2020).

Forna's novels are outspoken. Emily Mead says about *The Devil that Danced on the Water*. "In this heartbreaking memoir of Forna's quest to find the truth about her father, she outlines the grim prospects of a poor and largely illiterate populace that still suffers the legacies of colonial" (Forna 03). In this memoir, Aminatta revealed national dangerous secrets about the state, corruption of politicians, smuggling of diamonds and various crimes that Council members had committed to gain power (Hayette, 2020).

Forna is known for her bold views that are reflected in her novels. This kind of novel is about polygyny and how it is advantageous to women of the older generation. It shows this dislike of polygamy by the younger generation of women. The older are compromising while the younger are assertive and radical. The younger generation represents the contemporary women who are courageous and radical in their approach with the menfolk. They are no longer the victims (Ng'umbi, 2017).

4. A Feminist Perspective on Forna's (2006) *Ancestor Stones*

Aminatta Forna, the Sierra Leonean writer, encourages readers to interrogate family dynamics through fiction. Her novel, *Ancestor Stones* (2006), rich in history and women's memories, is told through the voices of four women in the

Kholifa family: cousins Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah. The story is about the family of Gibril Umaru Kholifa, a polygynous husband with eleven wives. The novel begins with a letter written by Alpha to his cousin, Abie. The letter urges Abie to come back home to revive the fortunes of the family coffee plantation. Abie's aunts have decided to leave the family coffee plantation for her to revive. Once she is back home, Abie's aunts (Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah) tell her stories. These stories are about the polygynous family, civil wars, bi-racial marriage, economic struggle, education, religious conflicts, corruption and European incursion in mining centres. These stories, narrated by different women with different experiences in the polygynous family, remind Abie of her personal history. By using the four aunts as narrators, the author makes the story rich in history and women's memories.

The stories of the four aunts provide a rich body of knowledge about what polygyny means; how it is used in gender role negotiation; how the narrative critiques Ogunyemi's womanism philosophy; and which "alternative tools" the narrative suggests for gender role negotiation, which implies a conglomeration of intersecting ideas of vision, accessibility to another world and desire for change. As a character, Asana, in *Ancestor Stones* states, "I wanted to come to this world, to the place where things happen. I didn't want to stay where I was. I always had big eyes for this world and I was born with them open. My mother never feared for me. There are some children—you can tell the ones—born with a hunger for life" (Forna 16).

Forna's *Ancestor Stones* covers a broad historical trajectory during which tremendous changes in familial arrangements start taking place. The novel begins with a polygynous family of eleven co-wives and ends by portraying widowhood as empowering; it also sees women entering professions and deals with divorce and bi-racial marriage.

Forna's feminist perspective in her narrative encourages readers to interrogate the efficacy of the institution of the "family" in initiating gender role negotiation in order to bring about equality and equity between men and women. Scholars from different fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, cultural studies, political science, and gender studies have variously defined the "family" as a tribal unit, biologically related members, a metaphor for nation and a microcosm of a larger community (Malinowski; Mbiti; Lee; McClintock; Strach; Carlson and Knoester; Wilder and Cain).

Ancestor Stones feminist *view* provides a nexus between past and present with the aim of eschewing the historical past that was built on patriarchal power dominance and gender inequality. The contemporary generation of African women writers began to advocate new changes that "seek not only to reinterpret, but to change the world in favour of women" (Ekpa 28). Forna's narrative perspective offers an opportunity to (re)read the institution of polygyny in twenty-first century Africa. Forna depicts the ineffectiveness of gender role negotiation tools in traditional African societies and the ways in which the con-

temporary generation can improve.

Forna's eleven wives clearly represent the older generation of African women which depicts gender roles in pre-colonial period. Those wives represent the different perceptions and experiences of polygyny. Here I agree with Kenneth Harrow who views *Ancestor Stones* as a novel that takes us back a few generations to the women ancestors on the African side of Forna's family in order to create a space that links the past with present. Therefore, in this case, the narrative communicates that contemporary African women writers do not disavow history but rather rewrite it according to the socio-cultural needs of the day. Forna's feminist perspective reveals how female characters' challenge patriarchal power and practically assume power and control in decision making.

Forna's narrators (Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah) give a historical account of how their mothers were part of a polygynous institution. It is seemingly beneficial to the older female generation. They depict their father, Gibril, as a rich man who uses his wealth to control and domesticate women. This is in antithesis between Gibril and the slaughterhouse worker (Hawa's husband), Hawa says: "this man [the slaughterhouse worker] was so poor I became his only wife" (179-80). Since the slaughterhouse worker has no access to polygyny, Hawa has to lead her "married life working like a servant" (180). This narrative appears to echo the idea that the institution of polygyny in the African traditional context as advantageous to women. This emphasizes the issues of shared responsibility and reduced labour force in the polygynous family. They are of the view that the higher the number of wives in the household the less toil women experience in the family. Hawa wants her husband to be polygynous in order to get co-wives who could help her in handling the household chores. She decides to divorce the slaughterhouse worker for failing to marry another woman. Through Hawa, readers are invited to read the institution of polygyny as a negotiation tool for gender roles in traditional African societies. It was powerful in lessening the burden of traditional "women's roles" in the family. In this regard, Hawa communicates a form of gender role negotiation through what Nnaemeka calls "compromise" "Nego-Feminism" with the patriarchal power. Nnaemeka points out that this strand of African feminism is built on the indigenous and it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts "Nego-Feminism".

Hawa grew up in a polygynous system and is therefore aware of certain men's desire to marry as many women as they can. In this context, Hawa is not only the link between the historical and the present polygynous family structure, but also attempts to reshape the modern day polygyny so as to become a weapon to lessen the burden of gender roles that are shouldered by women. Hawa's disapproval of her husband is not only because he is poor to the extent of not marrying other wives, but also she is not ready to be domesticated, "working like a servant"; rather, she wants to be flexible in life by alternating "wife roles" between her and her co-wife.

The need for women's flexibility and reducing gendered responsibilities shouldered by women in polygynous marriage is also captured by YaNamina, the senior wife of Gibril. She has the authority to choose wives for her husband and assign them responsibilities in taking care of their husband. What YaNamina does as a senior wife is to "maximize [the family's] economic benefits by selecting hard-working co-wives, and to limit intrafamily conflicts by choosing those junior co-wives [she] likes" and the ones who can respect her as a senior wife.

Therefore, Ya Namina uses a polygynous family as a decent space for women's empowerment, maintenance of equity, justice, harmony, and sharing of responsibility. She is in contrast with the assertion that polygyny obstructs development in many Sub-Saharan African countries and rather perceives it as a space for socialisation among women. Ya Namina subscribes to the African traditions by accepting the polygyny system that "provides children (and workers) for Africa's predominantly agricultural society, sons for men, and social security for women in their old age. Besides, Ya Namina holds the notion that having many children mean more labour and more labour means wealth. Taking the line of argument of Ya Namina one will hold blame the Western feminist critics for misrepresenting the polygyny system in Africa.

Forna's feminist perspective can be assessed or evident through the cooperation among the co-wives in Gibril's family. They live as sisters; each is aware of the others and they are responsible for taking care of all children in the polygynous household, if need be. For instance, when Hawa's mother is sick, Saffie takes care of her children. The kind of polygyny the narrative suggests through the wives of Gibril is the one that allows interaction among co-wives and obeys the hierarchy in the family, that is, from senior to junior wife. Such a family structure is also well articulated in Achebe's (1958) *Things fall Apart* and Nwapa's (1966) *Efuru*, where the roles of senior and junior wives are portrayed and practised accordingly without any quarrel. This type of polygyny is far from the desertion of women, as it happens in Bâ's *So long a letter* (1980). Pondering Ramatoulaye's husband Modou's version of polygyny, Nnaemeka says, "Modou's action is the foolish act of an irresponsible, wayward spouse and sugar daddy that has absolutely nothing to do with the institution of polygyny as it is inscribed both in Islamic law and African culture" (Ba, 1981). Subscribing to the "inscription of African culture," as Nnaemeka puts it, Ya Namina controls her co-wives in order to make sure that they obey her as a senior wife and act according to the needs of their patriarchal husband. Ya Namina "didn't like a wife she couldn't control" (64) and as a result she was to be the only one to choose women to marry her husband. The mutual understanding among co-wives and cooperation in solving their family problems validate the social mutualism of an African polygynous family.

That is why even Hawa, after having experienced her mother's life in a polygynous marriage, defines the concept of "co-wifeness" using the Themne word

'ores' to mean the women who share your husband with you. The women with whom you take turns to cook. The women you give whatever is left over in your own pot. The women who are the other mothers of your children, who suckle your baby when your own milk has dried up or unexpectedly soured [...] the word [ores] has another meaning [...] it means rival. (65) It can be agreed that in such a large polygynous family, it is hard to meet the interests of every individual and therefore rivalries are unavoidable. What matters is the harmony and cooperation among co-wives. Since Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah represent the generation of African women who are exposed to the two worlds (traditional and modern), they offer a critique of the two worlds based on their own experiences.

Knowing the advantages their mothers have in a polygynous household, Asana and Hawa opt for polygyny, which however is not equally advantageous to them. This is due to changes in time and space. They need first to reconfigure the polygyny system according to the needs of the modern world and make it a central institution for gender role negotiation. For example, Asana marries Osman Iscandari and becomes a third wife and Hawa, after divorcing the slaughterhouse worker, marries Khalil and assists Khalil in marrying another woman, Zainab. Khalil and Zainab eventually run off, leaving Hawa helpless. Their decision to divorce in a polygynous family communicates feminist awareness. Women are no longer marginalised; they can speak their voice to challenge the patriarchal hegemony. As such, the four narrators, while embracing the indigenous, as Nnaemeka would have argued in the context of nego-feminism, attempt to reconfigure the institution of polygyny according to the needs of the twenty-first century Africa where negotiation between the two opposing powers (patriarchy and matriarchy) has taken centre stage.

The history of polygyny as narrated by the four Kholifa family members inspires readers to consider the silence of the eleven wives of Gibril. In theorizing the discourse of power, Michel Foucault views silence as a shelter for power. He aptly observes: "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (101). Departing from Foucault's assertion, I consider silence to be a state of compromise and readiness to accept situations as they unfold. The narrative has silenced the co-wives to give their daughters a chance to speak on their behalf. Here, there is a danger of misinterpreting their perception of polygyny. Nnaemeka warns: "speaking for others requires carefully walking a fine line between participation and usurpation [...] speaking for others does not create absence and exclusion" ("Urban spaces" 163). The co-wives' participation in commenting on the state of their marriage in a polygynous family is very minimal. It is only on a few occasions that these women express their feelings to their polygynous husband. For example, Hawa's mother, Tenkamu, sings a song to her husband to express her love and commitment to her marriage (62). The fact that Gibril married only one wife, Tenkamu, out of choice indicates how polygyny as depicted in this narrative is driven by women. The narrator says, "After she [Ya

Namina] was widowed she could have returned to her own people as other wives did. But she stayed and chose a new husband from the younger brothers. She chooses my father” (16). Then she became the senior wife and the rest of the other co-wives, except Tenkamu, “were chosen by YaNamina” (64). Women are interested in marrying Gibril because he is a chief and a rich man. Therefore, despite the oppressive sentiments they encounter in their polygynous marriage such as being forced to desert their traditional religions, these women have accepted it and live a happy life. Their readiness to be in a polygynous familial structure communicates not only a form of gender role negotiation that could enable them to lessen the burden of gender roles that were shouldered by women, but also a desire to benefit from their husband’s wealth.

The willingness of women to join the polygynous family, as depicted in this narrative, indicates that in a traditional African setting, a polygynous family system was not a problem and women preferred it and were ready to join because it helped in role shifts and cooperation among co-wives. What Asana, Mariama, Hawa, and Serah view as oppressive to women is due to the influence of modernity. They have created their own world independent of their mothers’ generation. Their narration about their mothers is more exterior, they have excluded them from participating in the narrative in order to demonstrate the power of the contemporary generation of African women characters to speak their voice and challenge traditional values that favoured men at the expense of women.

Forna writes for twenty-first century generation readers who have a different life experience because of socio-political and economic changes. Therefore, as I demonstrate below, *Ancestor Stones* is a narrative that speaks about how the changes in family structure and space begin to occur and their implications for gender role negotiation. I do so by engaging in a discussion about how the narrative revises the familial structure, which in a way suggests gender role negotiation in an environment where patriarchal control dominates. The narrative represents how women were trying to negotiate power through the institution of polygyny but did not succeed. The failure of those means of negotiation calls for “new” ways that will make women negotiate power amidst patriarchal dominance. I discuss how women use the institution of the family to negotiate power by directly involving men in negotiation (as two conflicting parties) and how women navigate their way to achieve power amidst patriarchal hegemony.

Forna’s feminist perspective is admirable by her peculiarity in the creation of female characters who are conscious of what it means to be a woman in the twenty-first century. These female characters are assertive and are ready to subvert the male patriarchy. The narrative suppresses the teachings of mothers to their daughters that aim to subject them to patriarchal power. For example, Asana is told by her mother: “before you are married keep both eyes open and after you are married close one eye. But when I was young I closed my ears instead” (107).

The narrative’s characters appear to challenge women’s tradition-bearing role,

rather, they are determined to change the world so that the woman's body is no longer a fetish and a marker of traditions that deify men's power over women. The "closing of ears" as the character Asana demonstrates, is a sign of resistance. It is instrumental in signifying the female character's refusal to accept the "old traditions" that deny women power in decision making in the family. What Asana does is not only to reject the "old traditions" that oppress women, but also to dismantle a family structure that divides children on the basis of gender.

Pointing out the new direction that women can take in order to subvert men's power dominance over women, the narrative suggests revisiting African traditions with the aim of modifying them. It disrupts the discourses that contrive binary oppositions such as men/women, husband/wife, traditional/modern, child/adult, and religious/non-religious, which are the sources of inequality in the family and in society at large. By so doing, the novel inevitably creates a new form of family structure where the father figure, as portrayed by the older generation of African women writers, is no longer the head of the family. Even in polygynous situations, the father is silenced to give women a chance to speak. For example, Ya Namina, the senior wife in *Ancestor Stones* is in charge of everything in the family: "she paid the workers their wages and held the keys to the store; she ordered the provisions and hired the servants" (31) and the rest of the wives are answerable to her except for Tenkam. *Ancestor Stones* gives power to Ya Namina to control the family. The same applies to Asana; she marries Osman Iscandari as a third wife. When Asana is ill-treated by her husband, she seeks advice from her senior wife, Ngadie, who advises her to break up the marriage (127). Therefore, the narrative gives women power to make decisions for and to control their families. To achieve this role, it advocates cooperation among women in order to defeat patriarchal dominance. The novel considers men to be one of the enemies of women's success in their struggle for empowerment. By saying so, I am not accusing the narrative of advocating radical feminism which does not believe in the involvement of men in the women's struggle.

Ancestor Stones narratives, resorts to eliminating men who act as stumbling blocks to women's achievement of their socio-political and economic rights. Right from birth, says Asana, Alusani's "best deed in this world was to take from me what was mine" (17). Nnaemeka acknowledges the dual meaning of negotiation as "give and take/exchange" as well as to "cope with successfully/go around" (378). Such kind of negotiation, inevitably, is associated with a win-defeat principle. Forna portrays it as a viable form of negotiation because the patriarchal power has been using the same method in depriving women of their rights. Thus the narrative advocates a non-competitive environment where women can excel in their struggle without being in conflict with patriarchy by eliminating and marrying off wicked men in the family in order to make room for both men and women to exercise their powers equally.

Indeed, the novel's agenda to build a society that grants power and authority to women and men equally is very central. It depicts female characters that are determined to change. The narrative juxtaposes the older generation (Gibril's

eleven wives) and the contemporary generation (their daughters who are also narrators) in order to show their differences and how to resolve them. It is worth noting that the narrative considers “marriage”, “bride price” and “divorce” as concepts that depend on and influence each other. Marriage in the traditional context as depicted in narrative such as Emecheta’s (1979) *The Joys of Motherhood* cannot be achieved without a bride price. It is a prerequisite for marriage. In contrast, for *Ancestor Stones*, bride price is not a necessary condition for marriage. Rather, it is used as a tool for negotiating divorce. At the same time, the narrative introduces divorce as a counter-discourse to negotiate the binary oppositions such as the husband/wife power relationship. Due to changes in the society, under the influence of modernity, even court elders (who settle the divorce case between Saffie and Gibril) have changed and realize the importance of treating women fairly in the institution of marriage. In this case, the court of elders headed by men lays the ground for gender role negotiation. The court of elders encourages divorce in circumstances where women are ill-treated in order “to teach a lesson to those young men who could not afford wives of their own” (94). The novel discourages the diminishing value of a woman manifested in the bride price. Apart from equating a woman to mere commodities, the bride price domesticates her and prevents her voice from being heard in the public sphere. The narrative makes the matter complex when Saffie divorces her husband, Gibril, and “she never did pay him back” (101) the bride price. Such a complication invites readers to explore the kind of resistance Saffie brings to the fore in demonstrating her awareness of struggling for power. She knows how much she suffered in the institution of marriage engineered by bride price. Therefore, the money she will get out of selling eggs will be used to heal the wounds she suffered in her marriage, instead of sending it back to Gibril as the court of elders agreed.

It is interesting to note that, *Ancestor stones* encourages divorce and widowhood through Asana, and she indirectly introduces a “win-win” form of gender role negotiation where, at different times, a man and a woman need each other. In this way, the narrative discourages marriage. It creates a single parent family structure headed by a woman. Asana says: “In my dreams I lived in this house with my children, everybody fat and smiling [...] nowhere. You see, in my dream there was no man. Just me and my house and my children. And I knew I was as happy as I ever would be” (244). It was a dream but later becomes a reality. After the death of her husband, Asana refuses to marry again despite the pressure from her aunts. By so doing, she navigates her way by refusing to accept the patriarchal system engineered by her aunts. She decides to lead her own life by living like “mambores”—to mean a woman who lives like a man—refusing the societal conventionalised traits on what is expected of a woman. She divides her time between selling in her shop and staying with her daughter (Adie), granddaughter (Adama) and her great granddaughter. This signifies the new direction in which the novel has ventured in the course of fighting for women’s empowerment.

Instead, Asana embarks on trading activities as a way of navigating her way

through patriarchal dominance. She agrees with Susan Andrade's contention that West African women have historically been visible in the public sphere. As Andrade notes, "West African women in particular are famous as traders, and they have had enormous influence over the domestic economy by setting prices and controlling the availability of goods" (92). Forna portrays Asana as a woman ready to cast off the traditional ties that limit women to the domestic space. She is close to Madam Turay, a business woman, who draws her into business. Madam Turay makes Asana consider trading activities as the only means that can enable her to rid herself of the patriarchal yoke. Her travelling from Sierra Leone to Lagos and Accra to buy clothes for sale back home enables her to meet with women from other countries. Asana says, "We stayed with four other women. Two from Ghana. One from Guinea. Another from Upper Volta. All doing the same thing we were doing. All traders" (243). The narrative tells us that the time has come for women to engage in trading activities. In their trading activities, the novel calls for cooperation and solidarity among women.

For example, Sarah cooperates with Madam Turay and they manage to open their own store, namely "KholifaTuray Cloth Merchants" (244). Such advancement in business enables women to make decisions not only in arranging prices for goods as Andrade suggests, but also having a voice in the public sphere. That is why even other female characters such as Serah, Mariama, and Asana opt for politics, teaching and business respectively so as to have a space where their voices can be heard. Through their professional cadres, they can challenge not only the socio-cultural activities that suppress women, but also participate in economic activities and can have an authoritative voice to comment on the state of the postcolonial nation.

To cap it all, Forna's *Ancestor Stones* is also about feminism. It shows two women characters. The older women represent the liberal and belong to the nego feminist. The younger are the radical feminists who are desperate to bring changes and subvert male patriarchal society. The Novel shows that African women writers also find themselves negotiating the power struggle between men and women. The narrative begins by tracing the history of the family structure and how it has been changing over time with the influence of socio-political, economic and cultural changes. It shows the different strategies traditional African women used in negotiating for power in the family. The novel underscores the institution of polygyny as a space where women could meet and negotiate for power with men. The aim was to lessen the burden of handling the traditional gender roles. An alternative to this negotiation is found in *Ancestor Stones* when the contemporary African women in the novel devise a way of modifying the negotiation tools such as engaging in trading activities, divorce, and bi-racial marriage.

5. Conclusion

Forna's *Ancestor Stones* is a feminist work that portrays women experiences and

their sufferings in a patriarchal society. The author uses feminist philosophy to express her concerns about the African women. The novel showcases the assertiveness of the women character and their superiority in their family. Ya Namina is in control of the family of Gibril who is a rich man. She is in charge and that shows the authority that is commanded by the women in the novel.

The novel presents two sets of women character viz: the older generation who belongs to the negro feminism and the younger or twenty first century women generation who are the radical feminists. She imbues her female characters with intelligence, authority, strength, courage and brilliance while ignoring and snubbing patriarchal tradition and culture.

Forna's work tries to achieve women's rights and freedom in a patriarchal society. She refuses to be victimized in the patriarchal society. She presents her characters with special rights of assertion, authority and in expressing, speaking, thinking and having their own identities, names and emotions. She is against the misrepresentation of women and presents women characters who agitate for equality and equity. Her act of writing *Ancestor Stones* reflects her decision to have her revolutionary actions to reveal the full image of truth far from the sphere of men.

Her novel began to advocate new changes that seek not only to reinterpret, but to change the world in favour of women. It gives an opportunity to reread the institution of polygyny in twentynfirst century Africa. Thus, Fornal creates female characters who are conscious of what it means to be a woman in the twenty first century. The narrative suppresses the teaching of mothers to their daughters that aim to subject them to patriarchal power.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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