

Gendering Men:  
Masculinities, Nationalisms, and Post-Independence African Literature

By  
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Sarah Elizabeth Ngoh  
M.A., University of Louisville, 2009  
M.A., University of Louisville, 2007  
B.A., Ottawa University, 2002

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Chairperson: Dr. Byron Santangelo

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Dr. Giselle Anatol

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Dr. Stephanie Fitzgerald

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Dr. Randal Jelks

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Dr. Elizabeth MacGonagle

Date Defended: December 8, 2016

The Dissertation Committee for Sarah Elizabeth Ngoh  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

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## ABSTRACT

Studies on the relationship between gender and the nation tend to underscore the experiences of women, while obfuscating more complex understandings of gender, and eschewing a critical engagement with the ways in which men, too, are affected by constructions of the nation. Not only are the effects of the nation on men critically overlooked and undertheorized, but scholarship that addresses men as *gendered beings* in the nation is also quite scarce. In this dissertation, I examine what African literature can tell us about what constructions of masculinity mean to the nation and what the nation means to concepts of masculinity. More, specifically, I am interested in how this fluid and in-flux, yet symbiotic, relationship is depicted in African literature and what African literature can tell us about the relationships among African masculinities, African nations, and the exercise of power in post-independence nations(-states). I employ an interdisciplinary method drawn from postcolonial and feminist theories and masculinities studies concepts that breaks down the gendered dichotomies often relied upon in African literary and feminist studies scholarship on gender. Prevalent binaries such as colonial versus traditional, feminine versus masculine, or powerful versus powerless have led critics to narrowly define male characters as “oppressors,” “agents of patriarchy,” or “extensions of colonialism,” limiting our ability to understand, as I argue in chapter one, the complex moves someone like Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangerembga makes as she imagines a powerful patriarch who is overwhelmed by the multiple and conflicting gender roles both colonialism and traditional culture prescribe to him, or, as I argue in chapter four, the moves someone like Nigerian writer Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani makes as she imagines a violent, corrupt, and reprehensible Big Man who is also “good” for the nation. As a corrective, my project offers ways to see African masculinities and nationalisms represented in African novels as inextricably

relational and fluid, rather than oppositional and fixed. Through this methodology, I interrogate with more flexibility how African authors situate their concerns within the gendered relations of (neo)colonialism, anti-colonialism, and the construction of new nations; what they seem to be saying about different versions of masculinity and the nation; and how they challenge and reconfigure discourses on gender and nationalisms by offering counter-narratives that redefine not only what it may mean to be an “African” man but what it means to be a postcolonial African nation as well.

This dissertation is dedicated to my sons, Jax, Isaac, and Mikah, who first made me aware of the many complexities of masculinity.

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## Gendering Men, Situating the Nation, Gendering the Nation, Situating Men

“Whether we look at its iconography, its administrative structure, or its policies, the new postcolonial nation is historically a male constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as bearers of tradition” – Elleke Boehmer

“I think when we talk about the position of women in Africa and see how miserable it is, quite often we forget that these miserable women are married to miserable men” – Wangari Maathai

Elleke Boehmer’s claim regarding the new postcolonial nation, juxtaposed with Wangari Maathai’s comment on Africa’s “miserable” women *and* men illuminates an intriguing phenomenon in current scholarship on gender and the nation. While both postcolonial and feminist scholars have noted the significant relationship between constructions of gender and constructions of the nation, the tendency in much of this scholarship is, as Kavita Daiya asserts, to “translate the relation between ‘gender’ and the nation, as one between ‘woman’ and the nation” (1). Consequently, there exists a substantial body of feminist scholarship focused on the oppression and marginalization women experience through the construction of the nation, and on the ways in which women suffer when men, in the struggle for independence, also establish new forms of patriarchy or work to maintain the already intertwined traditional and colonial forms of patriarchy. Yet where women have traditionally been rendered invisible in scholarship on the nation, in terms of scholarship on the nation and gender, it is men who are rendered invisible. That is, studies on the relationship between gender and the nation tend to underscore the experiences of women, while obfuscating more complex understandings of gender, and eschewing a critical engagement with the ways in which men, too, are affected by constructions of the nation. Not only are the effects of the nation on men critically overlooked and

undertheorized, but scholarship that addresses men as *gendered beings* in the nation is also quite scarce. For this reason, Joanne Nagel notes that while an emphasis on women “has begun to fill a critical gap in the study of nationalism and national politics, there remains an important uncharted territory to be investigated” (243). This uncharted territory is, of course, a critical examination of the nation that places men and masculinities specifically at the center of inquiry.

In this dissertation, I seek to traverse one portion of this uncharted territory by examining what African literature can tell us about what constructions of masculinity mean to the nation and what the nation means to concepts of masculinity. More, specifically, I am interested in how this fluid and in-flux, yet symbiotic, relationship is depicted in African literature and what African literature can tell us about the relationships among African masculinities, African nations, and the exercise of power in post-independence nations(-states). I employ an interdisciplinary method drawn from postcolonial and feminist theories and masculinities studies concepts that breaks down the gendered dichotomies often relied upon in African literary and feminist studies scholarship on gender. Prevalent binaries such as colonial versus traditional, feminine versus masculine, or powerful versus powerless have led critics to narrowly define male characters as “oppressors,” “agents of patriarchy,” or “extensions of colonialism,” limiting our ability to understand, as I argue in chapter one, the complex moves someone like Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangerembga makes as she imagines a powerful patriarch who is overwhelmed by the multiple and conflicting gender roles both colonialism and traditional culture prescribe to him, or, as I argue in chapter four, the moves someone like Nigerian writer Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani makes as she imagines a violent, corrupt, and reprehensible Big Man who is also “good” for the nation.

As a corrective, my project offers ways to see African masculinities and nationalisms represented in African novels as inextricably relational and fluid, rather than oppositional and fixed. Through this methodology, I interrogate with more flexibility how African authors situate their concerns within the gendered relations of (neo)colonialism, anti-colonialism, and the construction of new nations; what they seem to be saying about different versions of masculinity and the nation; and how they challenge and reconfigure discourses on gender and nationalisms by offering counter-narratives that redefine not only what it may mean to be an “African” man but what it means to be a postcolonial African nation as well.

Such an approach focuses our attention to men as *gendered beings* who are simultaneously privileged and oppressed (albeit in significantly different ways) within the same colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial gendered systems of power that oppress women. Because, as I mentioned, masculinity operates as an unmarked category or unstated norm, which renders it invisible not only in scholarship on gender and the nation, but in everyday society as well, focusing our attention to African masculinities works to destabilize the African male subject, thereby making him visible, and, as Miescher and Lindsay point out, offering “insights into processes previously understood to be outside the realm of gender” (2). A focus on masculinities and men also offers a place from which to discuss the roles male characters play in feminist texts, beyond that of oppressor, while contributing a more nuanced and complex discussion of gender inequities that avoids binary oppositions in favor of more complex interpretations of the gendered colonial and postcolonial experience. This approach also focuses attention to the roles colonialism and nationalism serve as reinforcing agents in former traditional conceptions of gender and gender roles, and highlights the roles colonialism and nationalism play in the construction and reconstruction of both African gender, specifically masculinities, and African

nations. Moreover, this project illuminates how masculinities are produced and reconfigured in African literature, signaling an important shift in how African writers have relied on concepts of gender to grapple with notions of the nation, and on their understandings of the nation to grapple with concepts of gender.

Finally, this project's focus on the experiences of men and the production of masculinities in the nation as they are presented in post-independence African literature is not incongruous with feminist or postcolonial frameworks. An analysis of masculinities can contribute a great deal to both feminist and postcolonial theory as both disciplines seek to intervene in dominant, hegemonic discourses by exposing and validating alternative experiences, epistemologies, and knowledges. A focus on masculinities contributes to the feminist project of challenging and dismantling unequal gender power relations. Robert Nye argues that a focus on masculinity is "less concerned with exposing the anthropological and historical roots of patriarchy than [it is] with deconstructing the masculine/feminine binary in its various forms and with understanding its endless capacity for reinventing and reaffirming gender differences" (1938). Exploring the construction and espousal of masculinity then, shares the feminist agenda of complicating and breaking down the problematic male/female, masculine/feminine binary, as well as highlighting and challenging unequal power relations as they manifest in specific spaces. Moreover, such a focus has the potential to contribute significantly to the overall feminist and postcolonial justice-oriented projects of creating spaces where the voices and experiences of the oppressed and marginalized might be heard and validated, and, perhaps, ultimately lead to radical social transformation.

## **The Gendered Nation**

Since its inception, postcolonial theory has grappled with the issue of nationalism. Yet, because it cannot be understood as just one thing, concepts of the nation and nationalism(s) remain some of the most ambivalent and paradoxical in the discipline. As Ania Loomba contends, “it is difficult to generalize about nationalism because none of the factors we might think of as responsible for forging national consciousness – language, territory, a shared past, religion, race, customs – are applicable in every instance” (156). Likewise, Parker et al argue that “there is no privileged narrative of the nation, no “nationalism in general” such that any single model could prove adequate to its myriad and contradictory historical forms” (3), while Ranchod-Nilsson and Tétreault posit that “the chameleon quality of nationalism means that it can be couched in multiple and, at times, competing organizational forms and this confounds any attempt at glib generalization or universalizing pronouncements” (7).

Franz Fanon, the leading early theorist of anticolonial nationalism, advocates a materialist conception of the nation that is based on political agency and the collective struggle for liberation from colonialism. He writes,

The fight for national culture means in the first place to fight for the liberation of the nation... We must work and fight with the same rhythm as the people to construct the future... A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence A national culture in underdeveloped countries should therefore take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom which these countries are carrying on (233).

Understanding colonialism as the destruction of precolonial culture and history, Fanon insists that nationalism “invent a qualitatively new cultural consciousness, one that could only be

engendered through the political creation of struggle itself” (Chrisman, 187). For Fanon, then, the struggle for liberation and the construction of the new nation are inextricable, and, further, nationalism has the ability to transform (people, cultures, the future, etc.) through its constantly evolving struggle for liberation.

Fanon posits that attempts to build a national culture upon a re-created past is problematic, and he is careful to point out that a nation’s culture does not prove it a nation; rather, a nation’s existence is substantiated “in the fight which the people wage against the forces of occupation” (223). Fanon argues that national culture must come from the place where the people dwell: “... we must join them in that fluctuating movement which they are just giving shape to... Let there be no mistake about it; it is to this zone of occult instability where the people dwell that we must come...” (227).

This project’s focus on anticolonial nationalism, while not solving the problem of clearly defining the nation, does help to narrow the focus. Because anticolonial nationalism is always situated in direct opposition to former colonial powers or other forms of external domination, the two-faced nature of the nation is more clearly evident. For the anticolonial nation represents the powerful potential for a people’s liberation from oppression, while simultaneously operating through exclusivity, domination, elitism, and patriarchal power.

In his 1975 essay, “The Modern Janus,” Tom Nairn addresses these two seemingly conflicting sides of the nation by describing it as one head with two faces. He writes,

In short, the substance of nationalism... is always morally, politically, humanly ambiguous. This is why moralizing perspectives on the phenomenon always fail, whether they praise or berate it. They simply seize upon one face or another of the creature, and will not admit that there is a common head conjoining them. But nationalism can in this

sense be pictured as like the old Roman god, Janus, who stood above gateways with one face looking forward and one backwards (18).

Nairn's reference to the one face looking backward and the other looking forward reveals the nation's inescapable relationship with the past and its responsibility to the future, but the concept of the Janus-faced nation also points to the ways in which the nation simultaneously liberates/protects its citizens and represses/exploits them.

John McLeod notes that "this alleged fine line between liberation and authoritarianism as regards nation and nationalisms has worried many thinkers in postcolonial studies" (98). Boehmer notes, for example, that "nationalism can be deployed to reactionary and progressive ends; as a means to self-determination and social justice for an entire people, and a channel of their at once national and international consciousness, *and* as an oppressive formation run in the interests of the elite" (4), and Ania Loomba argues that the radical potential of anticolonial nationalism "ought not obscure its exclusions" (165). Gregory Gleason extends the two-faced Janus model to include a third. Like Fanon, Gleason emphasizes that the nation's potential for liberation comes in the form of opposition to external oppression (224). He warns that despite functioning as one of the most powerful weapons that can and has been used against colonialism, the nation is exclusive, inventing and forging a common political will and identity. He notes that "leaders have long recognized that the process of exclusions may be useful indeed in building the national will of the group: The most convenient instrument for building group self-identification is...counterposing the group's interests to those of an external group" (225-226). Loomba takes this point one step further when she argues that "nations are communities created not simply by forging certain bonds but by fracturing or disallowing others; not merely by invoking and

remembering certain versions of the past, but making sure that others are forgotten or repressed” (169). Similarly, McLeod notes that

in order to function, nations invent divisive borders, coercive regulations, notions of authenticity and illegitimacy which impact matters of belonging and group membership. The nation is always imagined as a finite space, occupying a certain terrain, inclusive of a particular people ‘us’ rather than ‘them.’ Inescapably, then, the processes both of imagining the nation and concretizing its administrative authority through the establishing of the nation-state are perhaps fated to be caught between contrary impulses: democratic, egalitarian, and inclusive on the one hand, and domineering, chauvinistic, and exclusive on the other” (101).

Yet what Gleason refers to as the nation’s domineering face, and what McLeod refers to as its domineering, chauvinistic and exclusive characteristics cannot be understood as merely facing outward toward the ‘other.’ For, as we’ve noted, and as many scholars have argued, these negative characteristics of the nation are often pointed inward as well. Fanon, for instance, warns of the dangers of elite nationalism in the formation of previously colonized nations. In fact, he devoted an entire chapter, “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” to this topic in his influential *The Wretched of the Earth*. In this chapter, Fanon argues that “National consciousness, instead of being the all-embracing crystallization of the innermost hopes of the whole people... will be... an empty shell, a crude and fragile travesty of what it might have been... [because] of the intellectual laziness of the national middle class... which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime” (148-149). Fanon argues that the bourgeois middle class understands nationalization “quite simply [as...] the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period” (152). Thus, Fanon argues, rather than

identifying with and serving the people whom they represent, the bourgeois middle class identifies with the western bourgeoisie, and acts, simply, as an intermediary between its country and the west. In this way, it “set[s] up its country as the brothel of Europe” (154). For Fanon, such a self-serving, bourgeois middle class is incapable of actualizing unity and “building up the nation on a stable and productive basis” (159).

Beyond the dangers of elitism, the nation is thought to be problematic, or potentially problematic for a number of reasons. Laura Chrisman argues, for instance, that there is a tendency by postcolonial scholars to “regard nationalism as inherently domatory, absolutist, essentialist, and destructive” (183). Most relevant to this project, Chrisman notes that postcolonial scholars have tended to understand the nation as a “patriarchal project that opposes the needs of women and the goals of gender equality” (188). Similarly, nodding to Benedict Anderson’s concept of the nation as an imagined community, Loomba argues, “If the nation is an imagined community, that imagining is profoundly gendered” (180), while Tamar Mayer argues that the nation is “inseparable from gender and sexuality” (1). Anne McClintock posits that “All nationalisms... are gendered... [and] dependent on powerful constructions of gender difference” (105), while Boehmer argues that “gender forms *the* formative dimension for the construction of nationhood” (23). Ranchod-Nilsson and Tetreault seem to agree with they argue that “no serious scholar writing about nationalism today can ignore or marginalize the gender dimensions of nations...” (3). Moreover, many of these scholars identify the nation’s gender as masculine. Cynthia Enloe, for example, argues that nationalisms have “typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope” (45), while Joanne Nagel insists that the “scripts in which these roles [in the making and unmaking of nation states] are embedded are written primarily by men, for men, and about men, and that women are, by design, supporting

actors whose roles reflect masculinist notions of femininity and of women's proper 'place'" (243).

In fact, even Fanon conceived of the struggle for liberation as a struggle of men. He writes, "Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men" (36), and he devotes the concluding chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, to explaining the responsibility of this new man to the liberation struggle and to the new nation. He writes,

So, my brothers, how is it that we do not understand that we have better things to do than to follow that same Europe?... Let us decide not to imitate Europe; let us combine our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us try to create the whole man, whom Europe has been incapable of bringing to triumphant birth... It is a question of the Third World starting a new history of Man... For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man" (312-316).

Though Chrisman argues that Fanon is aware of the issue of gender in the making of the new nation, it is clear from his writing that he sees women as serving a specific function in this process, and Fanon's conception of that function is highly influenced by his sexism. In fact, Jonathan Dollimore's work on the theorist is critical not only of Fanon's homophobia, but of his sexism as well. Citing several excerpts from Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, including Fanon's remark that "just as there are faces that ask to be slapped, can one not speak of women who ask to be raped?" (156), Dollimore argues that "Fanon deploys some of the worst prejudices that psycho analysis [sic] has been used to reinforce... [his] ignorance and misrepresentation of women and their sexuality is apparent" (32). Fanon is certainly aware of the issue of gender in the formation of the new nation, this awareness does not mean that he is informed, that he has

progressive notions about gender, or that he is absolved from his rather despicable misogyny. Even scholars who attempt to contextualize Fanon's sexism conclude that "what Fanon makes clear is that at the moment of his writing, political struggle and national sovereignty were unimaginable without a rehabilitation of masculinity" (Seshandri-Crooks 96). It is clear, then, that if Fanon, the "father of postcolonialism" and author of "the handbook on postcolonial struggle" firmly links the anti-colonial, post-independence nation with a specific notion of masculinity, the argument made by many scholars that the nation is a masculinist project is not without merit.

Indeed, as many scholars have noted, most commonly subsumed into the politics of nationalism is "the woman's question". Parker et al argue, for example, that "feminist programmes have been sacrificed to the cause of national liberation" (7), while Joyce Chadya insists that in Africa "for the most part... nationalist interests overshadowed women's issues as women were encouraged to focus on nationalist goals first. The rest would be addressed later... African nationalism accomplished its objectives at the expense of women's subordination" (153). Yet according to most feminist scholarship on gender and the nation, that women are expected to put nationalist concerns before gendered ones is merely one part of a larger problem.

Women are also understood to serve specific, symbolic roles in the nation. Ania Loomba argues that "as national emblems, women are usually cast as mothers or wives, and are called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation" (180). Similarly, Yuval-Davis and Anthias argue that women function in the nation as reproducers of future citizens and patriots, of ethnic and national boundaries and ethnic and national difference, and of ideology and collectivity. They also posit that women serve as transmitters of national culture (7). Likewise, Boehmer argues that in general "the women – and usually the mother-figure *stands for* the

national territory and for certain national values; symbolically she is ranked above the men; in reality she is kept below them” (29). As Karima Omar notes, these “gendered national symbols previously manipulated during the struggle to empower women to become active combatants, are transformed in the post-conflict state to reconstruct traditional gender roles and resurrect pre-existing gender stratification structures, which results in a collective dismissal of women and women’s issues in society” (50). When women attempted to step out of these prescribed national roles, they were faced with extreme pushback from men – and even other women – who viewed their attempts at autonomy as treason. These accusations were especially applied to women who attempted to work toward gender equity. Chadya notes: “...there has always been a hierarchical relationship between women’s movements and nationalism. Whenever women come out, strongly advocating women’s rights they are accused of being under imperial/western influence, therefore anti-nationalists and anti-male, and of having lost their culture and tradition” (155-156).

What Chadya reveals here is the frustrating position women of the global south faced, and continue to face, as they work towards gender equity. First, as Chadya notes, women in Africa who attempted to advocate for women’s rights during their nation’s struggle for independence were accused of being under western influence, specifically, the interest of western feminists who, it was argued, were responsible for the emasculating of western men. Like Fanon, most anticolonial nationalisms understood colonialism as having destroyed precolonial culture and history. Thus, they were constructed in direct opposition to the culture and lifestyle of their former western colonizers. African women who attempted to advocate for women’s rights were pressed on one side with accusations not only of hating and wanting to emasculate their men, but of hating their nations, their cultures, and themselves, as well. For the embracing of western

ideology/culture meant the destruction of the new nation. Pressing these women on the other side, were western feminist approaches to gender and the nation which have tended to misunderstand women when their experiences are situated in the global south. Because, as Chandra Mohanty argues, western feminist scholars have tended to position themselves as the “normative referent by which all women everywhere must be measured” (199), they often assume that women’s liberation and gender equality is the primary goal of women in the global south, and they are oblivious to ways in which women outside of the west also have the goal of political and cultural freedom from outside, western, forces.

Moreover, in their discussions of “third world” women, western feminist scholars have tended to construct these women “solely in terms of what seemed to them to be barbaric customs and subjugation, without taking into account the social and economic context in which they existed” (Yuval-Davis 118). In her influential essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholars and Colonial Discourse,” Chandra Mohanty argues that western feminist scholarship has “discursively colonize[d] the material and historical heterogeneity of the lives of women in the third world, thereby producing/representing a composite, singular ‘third world woman’” (197). Thus, western feminist scholarship on gender and the nation has tended to position women of the global south as perpetual victims of their countries’ patriarchal cultures, institutions, governments, and men, while giving little credence to the very different experiences of gender outside the west.

Likewise, despite the significant body of feminist research identifying the nation as male, there is surprisingly, very little work on the gendered experience of men in these masculine nations. Nagel notes, “if nations and states are indeed gendered institutions as much recent scholarship asserts, then to limit the examination of gender in politics to an investigation of

women only, misses a major, perhaps *the* major way in which gender shapes politics – through men and their interests, their notions of manliness, and masculine micro and macro cultures” (243). Moreover, scholarship that reduces women in the global south to perpetual victims of their nations’ patriarchy, results in the much too simple production of men in the global south as perpetrators and oppressors who benefit from and support the patriarchal systems in place. In short, by producing a composite, singular “third world” woman, as Mohanty argues, scholarship has also produced a composite, singular “third world” man. Nancy Dowd notes, “by focusing on women, feminists have constructed men largely as unidimensional” (3). This construction of the unidimensional man has resulted in an essentialist understanding of “third world” men only in terms of domination, while obfuscating the actual diversity and plurality of lived postcolonial masculinities around the world, and reinforcing the invisibility of masculinity as a gendered identity.

This invisibility of men and masculinities from gendered analyses of the nation should sound alarms for scholars concerned with the functions of gender and power. Masculinity studies scholar, Todd Reeser notes, that “the fact that masculinity has tended not to be thought of as gendered is a hole that should draw attention to its very absence... By marking masculinity and by taking it as an explicit object of analysis... we can begin the process of better understanding what masculinity is and how it functions” (9). For the purpose of this project, I rely on, and utilize the concepts of, masculinity studies to place masculinity explicitly at the center of my investigation of nationalism in African literature. In doing so, I make masculinity visible, and, thus, am better able to highlight its role in the gendered nation, to examine its relationship to constructions of power in several African countries, and to offer a more complete,

multidimensional composite of both African masculinity *and* African femininity, and African nationalism.

### **Masculinities Studies and Concepts**

While there's some debate about what to call it<sup>1</sup>, for the purpose of this dissertation, I will use the terms “masculinities studies” or “critical masculinities studies” to refer to the relatively new interdisciplinary field concerned with revealing and interrogating the constructions and dynamics of gender in order to visibilize and problematize masculinities and the position(s) of men in various social, cultural, and historical contexts. Like feminist, gender, and other social-justice-oriented disciplines, contemporary masculinity studies are concerned with exploring the issues of privilege and power, and the work of masculinities studies has been undertaken by scholars from a wide range of disciplines, a number of theoretical traditions, and to a number of different ends. Yet, for the most part, contemporary masculinities studies scholarship can be characterized in the following ways.

To begin, masculinities studies recognizes men and masculinity as explicitly gendered. As I've noted, the term “gender” has become a synonym for “woman” or “women”, particularly in the west. Courses on “gender studies” are assumed to be – and often are primarily – about women, and, as I pointed out early on in this introduction, scholarship on “gender and the nation” has been almost exclusively about “*women* in the nation.” Masculinities studies recognize men as *gendered beings* whose experiences of and participation in the world are

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<sup>1</sup> Connell, Hearn, and Kimmell, some of the most well-known scholars of masculinity studies, situate themselves in the camp that rejects the term “men’s studies”, for example, because it seems to imply a symmetry with women’s studies that is misleading given the reality of asymmetrical gender power relations, and embrace instead the terms “studies of men and masculinities” or “critical studies on men” because they believe it “more accurately reflect[s] the nature of contemporary work, which is inspired by, but not simply parallel to, feminist research on women” (3), while Alex Hobbs argues that the term “men’s studies” is primarily used within sociology, while “masculinity studies” is used in literary studies (383).

deeply informed by their understanding of what it means to be a man, and seek to reveal what this might tell us about the construction and maintenance of gender roles and power relations.

Related to this, by understanding men and masculinities as explicitly gendered, masculinities studies consciously and *purposefully* place the topic of men and masculinities at the center of inquiry. Whether addressing the discursive or the material, it focuses *specifically*, not incidentally, implicitly, or accidentally, on the topic of men and masculinities. In this way, masculinities studies make masculinity as a gendered identity visible. Masculinities studies situate men and masculinities as objects of study rather than the assumed subject or the unstated norm against which others are studied, what Todd Reeser describes as the “unmarked” side of the femininity/masculinity binary. Moreover, masculinities studies’ focus on men and masculinities is also a focus on power, inequity, domination, and subordination, and thus has the potential to contribute in productive ways to feminist theory and the overall feminist project of establishing gender equity. Christine Beasley argues, for instance, that “rendering gender and masculinity visible offers a challenge to existing power relations and their continuing reiteration” (87), a core component of feminist theory. Likewise, Dowd argues that focusing specifically on men and masculinity, “reveals a more complex portrait of men but also enhances the understanding of the construction of gender for women” (5). Kimmel argues that “to speak and write about gender is to enter a political discourse, to become engaged with power and resistance. It is about the resources that maintain power, the symbolic props that extend power, and the ideological apparatuses that develop to sustain and legitimate power” (30). Masculinities studies, then, is, as Dowd argues, “consistent with feminists’ dedication to unraveling and diminishing (or ending) gender inequality” (149).

Masculinities studies is also characterized by its intersectional approach. That is, the discipline understands that the study of men and masculinities necessitates an interrogation of its intersections with other social divisions: “Although men and masculinities are the explicit focus and are understood as explicitly gendered, men and masculinities are not formed by gender alone... men and masculinities are shaped by differences of age, by class situation, by ethnicity and racialization, and so on. The gendering of men only exists in the intersections with other social divisions and social difference” (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell 3). Likewise, Connell argues that to understand gender “we must constantly go beyond gender. The same applies in reverse. We cannot understand class, race or global inequality without constantly moving towards gender” (76).

Thus, masculinities studies recognize, or must come to recognize, as Alan Petersen argues, that “masculinity escapes precise empirical definition” (58). In fact, Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne posit that “masculinity has multiple and ambiguous meanings which alter according to context and overtime. Meanings of masculinity also vary across cultures and admit to cultural borrowing; masculinities imported from elsewhere are conflated with local ideals to produce new configurations” (12). Masculinity studies, then, acknowledges, often frames itself in, and uses the knowledge found in other disciplines, particularly in critical gender and sexualities theories. For instance, early studies of masculinity came out of a number of disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, and biology. Masculinities studies’ insistence that men and masculinities be the specific focus of critical analysis was a key characteristic of second wave feminism which understood women and womanhood as worthy of critical analysis. Likewise, queer studies has contributed a great deal to masculinities studies, as well because, as Annamarie Jagose notes, “queer marks a suspension of identity as something

fixed, coherent and natural” (98). Similarly, Dowd argues that queer studies “rejects the category and exposes it as clearly socially constructed and malleable. It argues for change not by recognizing the category but by rejecting it. It disrupts the sense of inevitable, natural binary sexual opposites” (51). Masculinities studies would be impossible without the many other disciplines that have helped to shape it.

Finally, masculinities studies’ acknowledgement of the existence of multiple and unequal masculinities works to make visible subordinate, subversive, and marginalized forms of masculinity. Focusing on these alternative forms of masculinity provides a much needed framework for challenging existing models of masculinity, and the construction of gendered power relations based on conceptions of masculine superiority.

As masculinities studies continues to evolve as an academic discipline, it should prioritize, as several scholars have noted, working to develop and articulate more precise goals. Unlike women’s studies, which has as its goal the emancipatory project of gender equality, masculinities studies’ goal is less clear, particularly because “men as a group are not subordinated and things associated with men are not devalued” (Dowd 27). Yet, in the meantime, masculinities studies continue to contribute a great deal to our understandings of the function of gender in society, as well as its relationships to discourse and ideology.

As the central focus of critical masculinities studies, if there is any truth about masculinity it is that it resists interpretation. Masculinity is as slippery and difficult to pin down as it is to achieve and maintain. Despite being socially and culturally constructed, masculinity is not something that can be thought of as having originated somewhere or as having been created by *someone*. As Todd Reeser notes, masculinity is “far too wide-spread, diffuse, and

complicated for any single person or group to create it. Because it infuses everything, one cannot ultimately determine its origin” (17). Moreover, masculinity is not a static identity, nor is it a predetermined mode of being: “Masculinity is not a fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals” (Connell and Messerschmidt 836). Thus, because it is in constant flux, challenged perpetually, and continuously created in a number of ways, masculinity is difficult to define. In fact, it has never been clearly defined (rather, it has been defined in a number of often contradictory, problematic, and incomplete ways: essentialist, normative, positivist, etc.), because any attempt to determine what it is must be framed within the sociohistorical, political, and cultural realities that constructed it in the first place. Such an approach, though necessary, makes simple, essentialist, heterogeneous definitions of masculinity impossible. Despite its ability to defy definition, R.W. Connell offers a useful analysis for how we might approach establishing useful, working definitions. She writes,

Rather than attempting to define masculinity as an object (a natural character type, a behavioural average, a norm), we need to focus on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives. ‘Masculinity’, to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of those practices in bodily experience, personality and culture (71).

Masculinity, then, is best defined via relations of difference. Sander Gilman posits that difference “is that which threatens order and control – it is the polar opposite to our group. The mental representation of difference is but the projection of the tension between control and its loss present within each individual in every group. That tension produces anxiety that is given shape as the Other” (21). The concept of masculinity, then, is very much like nationalism. In fact,

nationalism relies on and reinforces constructions of some men as superior to others and of all men as defenders of property, including women as property. Masculinity, then, is always created within frameworks of power, and operates as a means of policing who is “like us” and who is different, thereby establishing who should have access to power and who should not. In this way, masculinity is inherently relational. Not only does it “not exist except in contrast with ‘femininity’” (Connell, 68), but it is also only possible in contrast to forms of masculinity that are perceived as “less than” or Other.

Thus, any discussion of masculinity requires the acknowledgement that there is no *masculinity*, but, rather, many *masculinities*. In fact, the assumption, or assertion, that masculinity is homogenous leads to simplified discussions of masculine experiences, while distracting scholars from more complex arguments about gender and power. To address the problem of analytical frameworks that understand masculinity as homogenous, Connell introduced *hegemonic masculinity*, a concept that is, as Beasley points out, “virtually omnipresent in masculinity studies literature” (88). In its earliest formulation, hegemonic masculinity

was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue..., [it] was distinguished from other masculinities..., [it] was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men (Connell & Messerschmidt 832).

Though Connell later argues that the original model of hegemonic masculinity she presented offered a “too simple model of the social relations surrounding hegemonic masculinities [and that his attempt] to locate all masculinities (and all femininities) in terms of a single pattern of power, the ‘global dominance’ of men over women” was problematic, she maintains that the fundamental features of the concept remain useful. That is, the concept’s acknowledgement of a plurality and hierarchy of masculinities wherein “certain masculinities are more socially central or more associated with authority and social power than others,” wherein ‘hierarchy’ is understood as a pattern of hegemony not “a pattern of simple domination based on force,” wherein hegemonic masculinity is not always the most common pattern, nor must it be, evidenced in boys’ and mens’ lives, but it works through “the production of exemplars of masculinity... symbols that have authority” despite the fact that most men and boys do not reach it in their own lives, and finally, wherein the concept offers the possibility of change in gender relations continues to provide a useful framework for studying masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 846).

Noting that within his conception of hegemony, Gramsci always “had in mind a social struggle for historical change” (272), Connell later defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). Carrigan, et al define hegemonic masculinity as a “question of how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and produce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (592). Similarly, Robert Morrell describes it as a “question of relations of cultural domination,” and notes that “in addition to oppressing women, hegemonic masculinity silences or subordinates other

masculinities, positioning these in relation to itself such that the values expressed by these other masculinities are not those that have currency or legitimacy” (Morrell, 608). Dolan takes these arguments further, arguing that “at its simplest [hegemonic masculinity] can be described as based on sexist, heterosexist, ethnocentrist and adultist premises, and as entailing economic responsibilities and a particular relationship with the state” (60). The concept of hegemonic masculinity is useful, then, for understanding how power operates through gender and vice versa, for highlighting the way masculinity works in relationship to other identities, for accounting for various hierarchical rankings of masculinity based on specific contexts, for understanding masculinity as fluid rather than static, and for understanding men’s’ gendered relationships with their physical and ideological homes.

Despite its usefulness, the concept also has its limitations. Beasley summarizes the problems she understands regarding hegemonic masculinity as: a slippage “between its meaning as a political mechanism tied to the word *hegemony*... its meaning as a descriptive word referring to *dominant* (most powerful and/or most widespread) versions of manhood, and... its meaning as an empirical reference specifically to *actual groups of men*” (31). Beasley’s argument about the concept’s slippages is important to consider as it highlights the problems of equating the dominant form of masculinity with the legitimating form of masculinity. As she notes, “it is politically deterministic and defeatist to assume that the most dominant ideals/forms of masculinity are necessarily the same as those that work to guarantee men’s authority over women. Dominant forms of masculinity... may not always, at all times, legitimate men’s power, and those that do legitimate it may not always be socially celebrated or common” (Beasley 88-89).

Writing with Juanita Elias, Beasley argues that the concept's terms, "hegemonic," "dominant," and "legitimizing" need to be disentangled and better defined. Moreover, Beasley and Elias take issue with Connell's emphasis on the economic class relations present in gender relations, rather than the political or military relations present, arguing that within Connell's model, as with traditional Marxist analyses, gender is subsumed within class<sup>2</sup> (287). Stephen Whitehead argues that "the fundamental inconsistency in the term hegemonic masculinity is that, while it attempts to recognize difference and resistance, its primary underpinning is the notion of a fixed (male) structure" (93-94). Likewise, Dowd notes that there is a problematic tendency "to focus on the dominant form, thus reducing masculinity to a single essence" (53).

Other scholars have noted that the concept may not be particularly well-suited for explaining the experiences of men in the global south. Stephan Meischer, for example, notes that the concept "...fails to recognize historical and cultural situations within which several hegemonic forms of masculinity may coexist" (89). Similarly, Andrea Cornwall notes, "while the notion of 'hegemonic masculinity' may serve as a useful way of exploring identities in an era where influences were more limited, the very fluidity and hybridity of contemporary identities reveal its instability. Plural versions of what 'to be a man' can or should involve suggest, in turn, less a distinction between a 'hegemonic masculinity' and other residual variants than a spectrum of ways of being that are more or less valued by different kinds of people" (244). Lisa Lindsay and Stephan Meischer warn that, "studying masculinity in African situations requires using Connell's model with caution" because "...in colonial Africa it was *not* always obvious which notions of masculinity were dominant, or hegemonic, since understandings of gender depend on

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<sup>2</sup> Connell is clear, however, that since its very first articulation hegemonic masculinity has always been, and is meant to be, situated definitively within a discourse on class (830-831), but he rejects the notion that within his concept gender is subsumed within class.

the specific context and on different actors' subject positions. The limited power of colonial ideologies, combined with the social flux created by new constraints and opportunities, mean that a multiplicity of competing masculine identities promoted sometimes divergent images of proper male behavior within certain contexts" (6).

Recognizing the concept's shortcomings, Connell has remained open to reexamining how hegemonic masculinity might be reconfigured in ways that ensure it remains useful. In fact, in 2005, Connell, together with James Messerschmidt, published "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," wherein they note that "a comprehensive reexamination of the concept of hegemonic masculinity seems worthwhile," and concede that "if the concept proves still useful, it must be reformulated in contemporary terms" (830). In the article, Connell and Messerschmidt summarize what they understand to be the five main critiques of hegemonic masculinity: (1) that the underlying concept of masculinity is flawed because it deemphasizes dominance and power; (2) that the concept suffers from ambiguities in usage, such as the ones Beasley and Elias point to; (3) that there is a tendency in practice to employ the concept merely as a reification of power and toxicity, portraying masculinity and men as merely negative; (4) that the concept lacks a sound theoretical understanding of the subject; and (5) that the concept lacks clarity about the pattern of gender relations, that is, it remains unclear how hegemony is sustained (837-844).

Yet, as I noted earlier, Connell and Messerschmidt remain adamant that the concept continues to be contributive. They justify its usefulness by addressing the five critiques outlined above, and then articulate what they feel, based on the critiques, ought to be retained, rejected, and reformulated about the concept. They suggest that the concept be reformulated in four ways. First, citing the experiences of working class and ethnically marginalized men, as well as the

practices of women, Connell and Messerschmidt argue for greater analysis of the gender hierarchy:

we suggest, therefore, that our understanding of hegemonic masculinity needs to incorporate a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchy, recognizing the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics. We think this will tend, over time, to reduce the isolation of men's studies and will emphasize the relevance of gender dynamics to the problems—ranging from effects of globalization to issues of violence and peacemaking—being explored in other fields of social science (847-848).

Second, Connell and Messerschmidt suggest that the concept address the geography of masculine configurations by adopting a framework that analyzes empirically existing hegemonic masculinity at the local, regional, and global levels: “Adopting an analytical framework that distinguishes local, regional, and global masculinities (and the same point applies to femininities) allows us to recognize the importance of place without falling into a monadic world of totally independent cultures or discourses” (848-850). This suggestion, then, may address many of the critiques about the concepts unfitness for application to experiences in the global south.

Third, they call for an examination of social embodiment as related to the concept because “the pattern of embodiment involved in hegemony has not been convincingly theorized. The importance of masculine embodiment for identity and behavior emerges in many contexts” (850). Citing the issue of transgender practices, Connell and Messerschmidt call for a “more sophisticated treatment of embodiment in hegemonic masculinity” (850), one that understands the body as both an object of and agent in social practice (852).

Finally, Connell and Messerschmidt call for a deeper exploration of the dynamics of masculinities. They argue,

Without treating privileged men as objects of pity, we should recognize that hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily translate into a satisfying experience of life.... Put another way, the conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity should explicitly acknowledge the possibility of democratizing gender relations, of abolishing power differentials, not just of reproducing hierarchy. A transitional move in this direction requires an attempt to establish as hegemonic among men (“internal hegemony” in Demetriou’s [2001] sense) a version of masculinity open to equality with women. In this sense, it is possible to define a hegemonic masculinity that is thoroughly “positive” (in Collier’s [1998] sense). Recent history has shown the difficulty of doing this in practice. A positive hegemony remains, nevertheless, a key strategy for contemporary efforts at reform (852-853).

Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity coupled with these suggestions for how it might be reformulated enable a more careful and thoughtful employment in discussions of African masculinities.

I want to suggest further that what is particularly useful about Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity, may not be so much his and many others’ focus on hegemonic masculinity, but rather a critical engagement with those other forms of masculinity that Connell suggests exist in relation to hegemonic masculinity. Because he understands hegemony as related to cultural dominance in the whole of society, Connell argues that in relation to hegemonic masculinity other forms of masculinity exist as well: subordinate, complicit, and marginalized. I

believe that focusing on these other relational masculinities not only addresses the critique of the concept pertaining to an overemphasis on dominant forms of masculinity, but that these other relational masculinities lend themselves quite nicely to discussions of masculinity in the global south.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity enables us to explore how African men are affected by the colonial situation, particularly in regards to the gendered role(s) they inhabit and the “masculine” characteristics they exhibit both in the private and public spheres. It also enables an examination of how African men are situated, as a result of both traditionalism, colonialism, and nationalism, “between the hinges of the various hierarchical rankings [they assume]” (Manus, 27). Take, for example, the character Babamukuru in Tsitsi Dangerembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, which I discuss in chapter one. As the oldest son in the extended family, tradition dictates that Babamukuru will provide for the family. His position as oldest male child also ensures his authority – as long as he can fulfill the expectations of that role as provider. Babamukuru accomplishes this by obtaining a European education that qualifies him for a “good” job at the mission school which enables him to provide financially for his entire family. In this way, Babamukuru can be understood as representing a form of hegemonic masculinity, a role that reinforces his status as traditional patriarch of the family.

In the private sphere, with his family, at the homestead and among other Africans, Babamukuru’s education and his ability to provide financially for his family reaffirm his dominant masculinity, while his actions and words are used to validate or delegitimize the thoughts and actions of the other male characters in the text, maintaining his representation of hegemonic masculinity and reinforcing his position of power and authority in his family.

In the public (colonial) sphere, as a colonized African, however, Babamukuru's masculinity is no longer part of the hegemony. He is not free to make decisions where the colonial world rules; neither is he free to make objections or change/improve conditions. He is powerless. Babamukuru's power and authority in the private sphere are entirely dependent on his powerlessness and complicity in the public sphere. Thus, due to colonial contact, Babamukuru's authority, even in the private sphere, is limited. This becomes evident when Babamukuru's interactions with female characters become more or less severe based on whether or not he feels his own social position and authority threatened in the public sphere, and/or when he feels colonialism disrupting his access to authority in the private sphere.

Babamukuru's experience is not mere fiction. Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis posits that "given the pervasiveness of colonial rule and the harsh consequences for non-compliance, African men's sphere of authority shrank considerably" (166). Echoing this point, Egodi Uchendu argues that

In the long run, male control in the home lost its potency just as it did in the wider society where the colonial administrators took over the public political spaces and initiated a political structure intended, according to official colonial report, to 'break indigenous methods of control' and 'to make Africans directly dependent on European administrators' (Weinrich, 1971:11). The dwindling masculine control in the family apparently triggered gender clashes in attempts to re-establish control (10).

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, then, is useful for understanding the many ways the presentations or performances of masculinities are determined, influenced or impacted by specific social contexts and external forces, such as colonialism and, later, nationalism.

Colonialism also worked to reinforce notions of hegemonic masculinity through “relations internal to the gendered order” (Connell, 80). Colonialism depended on the subordination of African men to white colonizers, thus it makes sense to consider how a concept of subordinate masculinity might contribute to our understanding of colonial and national African masculinities. In his discussion of subordinate masculinity, Connell offers the subordinate masculinity of gay men – in relation to the dominant masculinity of straight men – in western society as the most obvious example. Yet Connell is careful to note that this social relationship between gay and straight men is much more than the result of a cultural stigmatization of gay men. Rather, it is confirmed in a number of material practices, such as political exclusion, street violence, and economic discrimination, to name to just a few examples.

While it is true that gay masculinity is not the only form of subordinate masculinity, Connell notes that “from the point of view of hegemonic masculinity gayness is easily assimilated to femininity” (78). It is this perceived relationship with femininity, and femininity’s already-assumed inferior position to masculinity, that, serves to subordinate gay men. This subordination is sustained discursively through vocabularies of masculinity which rely on words like wimp, sissy, girlyboy, and bitch which simultaneously reinforce a hierarchy of masculinity, and symbolically blur the line between femininity and masculinity.

Connell’s discussion of subordinate masculinities is quite useful to discussions of colonial and colonized masculinities, for one has only to consider the paternalism present in colonial and imperial discourse to see that this is true. In *Gender and Empire* Philippa Levine argues that “sex was a significant imperial policy issue and a ‘key site of colonial anxieties’” (134), and, “in as masculine an environment as the Empire, male sexuality was an issue governments could ignore only at their peril” (137). Colonial masculinity was constructed as a

white, male sexuality characterized by self-control, moderation, and regulation. This construction, which was vital to sustaining the concept of colonial superiority and domination, relied on a discourse that constructed the colonized male as sexually deviant, weak, effeminate, and lacking self-control. Moreover, colonized men were associated with over-sexedness, perversion, and immorality. Colonial discourse constructed the masculinity of the colonized in terms of sexual excess, linked that excess to “effeminacy, enervation and weakness... all signs of endangered masculinity” (Levine 137). In constructing the colonized male as driven only by the basest of instincts, notions of European racial and cultural superiority, and a dominant colonial masculinity characterized by moral superiority, self-possession, rationality, and intellect were sustained, while a subordinate, colonized masculinity was constructed and reinforced.

Colonialism also feminized and infantilized the colonized man, not only through notions of sexual excess, but by reordering society in ways that affected traditional men’s work. In Africa, for example, colonialism changed the way African men were able to provide for their families. Most pre-colonial African societies were farming communities, largely dependent on their land and livestock, especially cattle. The colonial situation, however, significantly impacted many African societies’ primary source of food and work by dispossessing them of their land, thereby eliminating the means by which African men had traditionally provided for themselves and their families, and essentially stripping African men of their manhood.

As a result, African men were often forced to seek work away from the homestead. This work, in urban centers, maintained and controlled by members of the colonizing class, was usually demeaning. Speaking specifically about the situation in South Africa, Morrell argues that wage-earning activities made available to Africans in urban spaces “were menial, brutal or

unmanly” (623). Similarly, in his discussion of Shona<sup>3</sup> masculinity, Uchendu, has argued that when men entered urban spaces in search of work they “lacked autonomy over the type of work they did” and often were forced to fill roles that were traditionally thought of as feminine (90). According to Uchendu, colonial experience compelled Shona men to internalize a masculinity intended to transform and place them in subordinate position in relation to the colonial officers. Colonialism, then, not only stripped African men of their ability to achieve manhood through work, but when making work available to African men, relegated them to positions that were considered feminine, thereby reinforcing their perceived lack of manhood.

Colonial paternalism contributed to this subordinate position. In his discussion of the use of the term “boy” by white colonizers to black South African men, Morrell argues,

the use of the word ‘boy’ by whites... to refer to black men reflected a workplace reality in which African men did the menial work, requiring strong, energetic and powerful bodies... The use of the diminutive suggests how the relationship between white colonizer and black colonized involved emasculation. The word captured a condescension, a refusal to acknowledge the possibility of growth and the achievement of manhood amongst African men (616).

Colonialism, then, not only stripped African men of their ability to achieve manhood through work, but when making work available to African men, relegated them to positions that were considered feminine (cooks, housekeepers, and “houseboys”), and relied on a language of emasculation, thereby reinforcing their perceived lack of manhood. The success of colonialism depended on the subordination of African men to white colonizers. This relationship of

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<sup>3</sup> The Shona are a group of Bantu people residing in Zimbabwe and neighboring countries.

subordination manifested in material practices, such as political and cultural exclusion, cultural denigration, physical, cultural, and spiritual violence, and economic disenfranchisement for the African man. In this way, African men were relegated to the bottom of the gender hierarchy, while the conquering, paternal, white colonizer represented hegemonic masculinity.

The negative, psychological impact of this reconfigured African manhood deeply impacted the relationships between African men and women. Though tradition assumed that the African man would protect African women and children in the public sphere, the colonial situation made this impossible. As I demonstrate in my discussion of Babamukuru, while African men were often able to establish and maintain some sort of authority in the private sphere, the vulnerable nature of that authority was continuously reinforced in the public sphere. What becomes evident in the literature is that when the African man's power is usurped in the public sphere, it intensifies in the private sphere, leading to "increasingly virulent patriarchal, i.e. sexist, behavior [that is] brought to bear on the colonized female..." (Manus, 29), thus further complicating relationships between men and women. And, further, pointing to a relationship of masculinity complicity.

Armah points to this reality in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* in his discussion of African gender relations after African men returned from WWII. African men who believed that joining the army and fighting in the war would earn them the respect and human dignity that was denied them under colonialism, returned to find that this was not the case, that they had been used as pawns and cannon fodder, and, moreover, that their absence resulted in drastic changes to the gender order. Their absence forced African women to become more independent, making the just-returned soldiers' roles as providers and protectors obsolete. Though, as I point out in chapter two, this anger is, on the one hand, framed as a betrayal on the part of African women, it

is evident that these African men are angry because they failed to live up to their own gendered expectations. The text is clear: these men are primarily angry at themselves once they realize that instead of fighting an unknown enemy “they should have learned to fight” the enemy they do know, they should have been “real men” who protected their loved ones from the oppressive and exploitative violence of colonialism. Rather than taking their anger and frustration at themselves and the colonial situation, these soldiers took their anger and frustration out on their families. The Man tells us, “when the war was over the soldiers came back to homes broken in their absence and they themselves brought murder in their hearts and gave it to those nearest to them” (64). This violence toward women and children must be understood, at least in part, as an expression of complicit masculinity. Although these men do not have authority over their colonizers, they do have authority over their women. By exercising violence on the bodies of African women and children, African men were complicit in maintaining the colonial gender hierarchy.

For example, in the public, or colonial, sphere, Babamukuru’s masculinity is subordinate. Yet his willingness to lower himself in that public sphere can also be read as a form of complicity. Babamukuru complies with the hegemonic pattern in order to maintain, as I noted, his authority in the private sphere – which is only possible through his subordination in the public sphere – because he knows that what little authority he does have is only available through the preservation of the colonial system which maintains a hierarchy that subordinates women.

Connell argues that within the relationship between subordinate and dominant masculinities, is also complicit masculinity. He posits that the “number of men rigorously practicing the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small, yet the majority of men gain

from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (79). Dowd points to this concept of complicity in her defense of masculinities studies when she argues that masculinities studies scholarship “exposes in particular the odd reality that most men feel powerless rather than powerful yet that powerlessness does not lead to alignment with other subordinated groups but rather to a defense of potential or actual privilege, even if it is privilege that particular men do not enjoy” (5). For instance, in class discussions about gender, sexism, and homophobia, when confronted about why they don’t speak up when they hear their friends or family denigrating women or queer/trans men, my male students, regardless of race, class, religion, ability, and sexuality (when the discussion regards the denigration of women), almost all respond in the same way: because doing so has the potential to make themselves the object of denigration. These male students, then, in these situations, are demonstrating a complicit masculinity. Because they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, many male students are reluctant to articulate a position that would result in them being harshly judged by other men. As Kimmel points out in *Guyland*, “Masculinity is largely a homosocial experience: performed for, and judged by, other men” (472).

Take, for example, Kingsley’s views on women in Nwaubani’s *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*. Though it is clear that Kingsley suffers because of his family’s poverty, and that he is powerless to change his situation, rather than aligning with other oppressed populations, like women, for example, Kingsley maintains a view of women as inferior to men. His misogyny is evident throughout the novel. He tells us, for instance, that he liked his girlfriend, Ola, initially because she “looked innocent” (27), and because she “was 100 percent wife material” (31). He goes on to explain, “I did not need to be an expert on women matters to know which girls had

dabbled in more than their fair share of promiscuity and which were vampires – female Draculas on a mission to drain your bank balance dry” (27). Kingsley’s sense of entitlement is clear when Ola tells him not to visit her in Owerri again. Rather than respecting her wishes, Kingsley thinks to himself, “Besides, women are from Venus. Like tying up shoelaces, they are full of twists, turns, and roundabouts. They say something when what they really mean is another thing. For all I knew, right now, Ola was hoping that I would pay her a visit and wishing that she had not been so harsh on me the last time,” right before making a trip back to Owerri. Kingsley’s beliefs about and treatment of women in this novel offer a clear example of complicit masculinity; they work to defend male privilege – even though his poverty denies him the full benefit of that privilege.

Finally, Connell’s framework also addresses what he calls marginalized masculinities. Connell writes that marginalization refers to “the relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups. Marginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (81). To illustrate his point, Connell uses the example of black masculinity in a white-supremacist context, noting that while, for example, some black athletes may serve as exemplars for hegemonic masculinity their success, wealth, and fame does not trickle down to other black men because “it does not yield social authority to black men generally” (81). In the same way that successful black athletes in a white-supremacist society lack the authority to extend their success to all black men, so too do colonized or formerly colonized men who happen to achieve success lack the authority to extend that success to other colonized or formerly colonized men.

Consider, for example, the respect and authority Babamukuru earns through education, hard work, and subordination. This success does not transfer to his lazy brother, to his son, or to any other African man. Babamukuru is exceptional, and he is the exception. Consider, too, my

discussion of the character Cash Daddy in chapter four, which illustrates the relationship of marginalization/authorization quite nicely. Connell argues that “hegemonic masculinity among whites sustains the institutional oppression and physical terror that have framed the making of masculinities in black communities” (80). I contend that the same could be said about African masculinities: Colonial and imperial hegemonic masculinities among western whites sustained, and continues to sustain, the political and economic oppression, cultural terror, and physical violence that have framed the making of masculinities in African communities.

Where Cash Daddy is presented as possessing a dominant and authoritative masculinity as a Nigerian Big Man, the novel also implicates a *more* dominant and *more* authoritative masculinity in the white, male, westerners with whom Cash Daddy and his 419ers interact. Looming in the background of every encounter, in the background of the narrative itself, is the presence of white, western power, money, and authority. Moreover, where Cash Daddy has the authority to lift up individual African men, such as his nephew Kingsley, raising their status and helping them achieve a recognized success as *men*, his success does not give him the authority to bring all of his Nigerian community success. For the reality is that within the larger, globalized world, Cash Daddy represents a marginalized masculinity, which severely impacts his ability to enact wide-spread social/political mobility for Nigeria or Nigerians.

### **African Nationalism, African Men**

Given the effects of colonialism on traditional gender relations in Africa, it is no surprise that at the center of African anticolonial struggle for independence were anxieties about masculinity. Boehmer notes, for example, that “the nations *engendering* took on particularly acute forms in Europe’s former colonies. Where the intersection of the male dominance

prevailing within imposed and indigenous social structures meant that a hyper-masculinity became both the over-determined legacy of colonial state power and a means of resistance to it” (33). Likewise, Reeser notes that resistance to colonial discourse that constructed the colonized male as having an inferior or feminized masculinity can be understood as “an attempt to flip the opposition, to remasculinize a group made to seem effeminate by dominant cultural constructs. Resistance to a colonizing power may include attempts to reconstruct the colonized as masculine, or as more masculine, than the colonizer” (191).

Consider Okonkwo’s actions upon returning from his seven-year exile to realize that his community, Umuofia, has changed greatly due to a new colonial presence. In response to these changes and the colonial presence, Okonkwo mourns for the days when the men of his war-like village were “still men.” Okonkwo works twice as hard to regain his position of power in the community. He rejects his oldest son, Nwoye, who has rejected a violent masculinity for himself, and who has adopted the white man’s religion, calling him an “abomination,” and declaring to his other five sons that “I will only have a son who is a man” (172), and embraces an increasingly violent masculinity. In fact, Okonkwo only begins to feel happy again after “speaking violently” to his clansmen about the action they should take against a missionary. Okonkwo believes that Umuofia is regaining its true men: warriors, who fear no one and nothing. When Okonkwo and some other men from his village are captured by the Commissioner, they are thoroughly emasculated. The District Commissioner humiliates them by shaving their heads, starving and beating them, denying them a private, hygienic place to use the restroom, and requiring them to pay a fine before they could be released. Okonkwo believes that violent vengeance is the only reasonable response to this humiliation, and swears he will avenge

himself with or without his clan members. Thus, the novel ends shortly after Okonkwo violently decapitates the messenger from the white man's camp.

Okonkwo is clearly concerned with what he understands to be the feminizing results of colonialism on his clan. Thus he embraces a masculinity steeped in violence in an effort to remasculinize both himself and his village. This remasculinization is meant not only to regain what seems to have been lost due to colonial interference, but Okonkwo also intends it to act as a threat to and rejection of the colonial presence.

It is certainly true that central to the process of anticolonial struggle in Africa was the reification and (re)articulation of a (new) African male identity that challenged colonial discourse and demanded the necessary space for African men to define themselves and their nation on their terms. These nationalisms were constructed via conceptions of masculinity that positioned the African male as essential to the struggle, and that emphasized a rediscovery of the "natural" masculine characteristics that were destroyed by colonialism.

Anticolonial articulations of African masculinities stressed the necessity of rediscovering the "natural" masculine characteristics that were destroyed by colonialism: only when African men became "real" men again through the reclamation of their manhood could true independence be established. For example, Franz Fanon writes, "At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man" (8), arguing that colonialism stripped the African man of his manhood. Similarly, anti-apartheid activist and founder of the Black Consciousness movement, Steve Biko, warns that "the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood... [he has] become a shell, a shadow of man, completely defeated, drowning in his own misery, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with

sheepish timidity” (29). According to Biko, changing the status quo of South Africa’s oppressive apartheid system is impossible unless the black man “come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth” (29). Likewise, Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah asserts that “Revolutions are brought about by men, by men who think as men of action and act as men of thought,” positioning a specific kind of masculinity (one characterized by thoughtful action) as crucial to the successful struggle for independence. Thus, anticolonial nationalism constructs an African masculinity that requires African men to be “real” men, that is, physically and mentally “manly” as opposed to timid or meek, acting as opposed to being acted upon, proud as opposed to defeated, and responsible and thoughtful as opposed to dependent.

Yet what an examination of nationalism and masculinity in African literature reveals is that the ideal national masculinity was difficult to achieve for most African men, and when achieved, impossible to maintain. The implications of this gendered reality are many. First, it quickly becomes apparent that in colonial, early postcolonial, and contemporary Africa, masculinities are not only deeply informed by western expressions of dominant masculinities, but they are also positioned subordinate to these dominant masculinities in the global hierarchy. Further, at any given time, there always exist, in Africa, multiple, dominant forms of masculinity functioning simultaneously in both the public and private spheres. Because African men can neither achieve the ideal, western hegemonic form of masculinity, nor maintain (if achieved) the ideal national hegemonic masculinity, and, because masculinity is constantly transforming and always in danger of being usurped by a more dominant form of masculinity, the literature seems to suggest that there is always, within the experience and expression of masculinity, an anxiety

that is felt doubly, a masculine double-consciousness, if you will, by African men who are aware of their perceived inferiority and their innate potential. This masculine double-consciousness, I argue, doesn't result in stunted gendered experiences; rather, in this dissertation, I argue that African literature suggests the pursuance and enactment of complex and flexible forms of masculinity by African men.

### **Overview of the Chapters: African Literature and Representations of Masculinity**

My dissertation seeks to expand current discourse on African literature by illuminating the relationships between African masculinities and African nations. I argue that these texts challenge and complicate simplified readings of male characters; they also pinpoint the relationships existing among colonialism, tradition, masculinity, and the unrealistic expectations and impossible-to-fulfill roles that colonialism, and later nationalisms, implicitly expected from African men, as well as the relationships among nationalism, tradition, gender and political power.

Each of the texts engage with notions of masculinity and nation in ways that highlight the impossibility of separating the two. They all, to some extent, link the nation's past and future to gendered bodies and gendered bodies to power. Furthermore, they all offer representations of masculinity that challenge and complicate simplified readings of male characters as mere agents of traditional patriarchy or extensions of colonialism. While they also point to the impossible-to-fulfill roles both colonialism and nationalism expect from the African man, emphasizing not only the roles that restrict African men, but the ways in which these restrictions affect African women, they also demonstrate the ways in which those restrictive roles are actually damaging to the nation.

Finally, each of these texts invokes the concept of hegemonic masculinity to facilitate a more meaningful understanding of the relationships between men, masculinity, power and authority; to reveal a multiplicity of often, though not always, conflicting masculinities; to call attention to the fluid, situational, and relational aspects of African masculinities; and to underscore how competing forms of masculinity, competing dominant forms of masculinity, too, enable African men to pursue diverse and complex forms of manhood – even under the constraints of colonialism and nationalism.

I begin, in chapter one with a discussion of TsiTsi Dangerembga's *Nervous Conditions*. As the first novel published in English by a Zimbabwean woman, Dangerembga's text is particularly interesting to my discussion of how African masculinities are produced in literature because, since its publication, has been the primary focus of feminist scholars interested in the relationships among colonialism, tradition, and African women, signaling a significant milestone in feminist scholarship on the experiences of African women. Furthermore, Dangerembga's text is useful because it offers an interesting opportunity to explore a contemporary author's perception and (re)imagining of colonial masculinity. That Dangerembga's story occurs during colonialism is important because it enables me to introduce an example of the historical realities of colonialism which have had long-reaching effects on African gender relations, and because it serves as a theoretical and conceptual framework for the rest of the dissertation which focuses on African masculinities which have been informed by and constructed in opposition to colonialism. I argue that the previously relied upon feminist frameworks used to discuss the novel must be expanded to grapple with the novel's male characters, specifically, the novel's patriarch, Babamukuru. I offer a reading of Babamukuru's character that acknowledges the multiple,

conflicting, and overwhelming gender roles both colonialism and traditional culture prescribe to African men.

Chapter two situates Ayi Kwei Armah's first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, as an example of the kind of anticolonial, pro-nationalist writing produced during the 1950s and 1960s. By incorporating disability, gender, and postcolonial theory, I offer a close reading of each of the text's male characters to demonstrate how Armah relies problematically on masculinity and the male body, as well as a language of disability, to symbolize the damage wrought by colonialism and the mistakes and shortcomings of the nation-state and neocolonial nationalist ideologies, while highlighting how his Pan-Africanist ideology informs and restricts his notion of the "best possible" nation, who can participate in that nation, and what sort of bodies make that participation possible.

Chapter three intervenes in current Big Man discourse by offering a critical examination of the Big Man in African literature. In an effort to narrow the scope, I focus specifically on the Nigerian novel and what depictions of the African Big Man figure might contribute to our understanding of Nigeria as a nation. By focusing on how the Big Man operates and the dynamics that make that process possible, as well as how Big Man power is achieved, maintained, affirmed, and contested, this chapter contributes a more complex understanding, and more productive analysis of what the Big Man might mean to the nation. I examine the Big Man characters Okonkwo from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and Chief Nanga from Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1967). Both of these novels was written and published during significant historical moments and are rooted in and shaped by the political climates of their times. *Things Fall Apart*, written during the process of decolonization and on the precipice of independence, reflects a pre-colonial Igbo clan and uses the figure of the precolonial Big Man to

navigate the space between “the hegemonic culture of the colonizer and the repressed traditions of the colonized” (Gikandi 102), in an effort to imagine the best possible version of the new nation. *A Man of the People*, written during the tumultuous time of Independence, reflects the incoherence, confusion, and anxiety of the period, and uses the new-postcolonial Independence-leader Big Man to explore “the process by which the dream of national liberation was negated” (Gikandi 124.) I argue that in each of these novels, the Big Men reflect not only the social and political realities of their time, but that their roles, their power, and how it is acquired and maintained, provide a specific commentary on the nation. I contend that Achebe uses the Big Man figure to challenge and reconfigure both Nigerian and Western discourses on the African nation and African gender and power relations in new and meaningful ways

My final chapter continues my discussion of *I Do Not Come To You By Chance*, this time focusing on the marginalized masculinities of the novel’s main characters. I explore how the concept of protest masculinity might highlight the relationship between present-day Nigerian young men and the Nigerian nation-state. I argue that Nwaubani seems to suggest that protest masculinity offers young Nigerian men a means for fulfilling their gendered expectations in a society that makes masculine success difficult to achieve, but that this redefinition of masculinity is problematically predicated on the continued marginalization and oppression of Nigerian women.

## Chapter One:

### Unbecoming to Become (Undone): Babamukuru's Nervous Condition

“Yes, it was a romantic story, the way my grandmother told it. The suffering was not minimized but the message was clear: endure and obey, for there is no other way. She was so proud of her eldest son, who had done exactly this.”

–Tambu, *Nervous Conditions*

“...Babamukuru was not the person I had thought he was. He was wealthier than I had thought possible. He was educated beyond books. And he had done it alone. He had pushed up from under the weight of the white man with no strong relative to help him. How had he done it? Having done it, what had he become?”

–Tambu, *Nervous Conditions*

Since its publication in 1988, Tsitsi Dangerembga's *Nervous Conditions*, the first novel published in English by a Zimbabwean woman writer, has been widely accepted and critically analyzed as a feminist text that addresses concerns about gender inequity. It would be quite difficult to argue that the novel is not feminist, for the themes of gender, gender roles, and gender disparities are prominent throughout. One such example comes from Tambudzai (Tambu), the young narrator, after Babamukuru, her uncle, beats Nyasha, her cousin, for behaving “like a man” (116):

The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn't depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn't depend on any of the things I thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them. Even heroes like Babamukuru did it... What I didn't like was the way all the conflicts came back to the question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness (116).

This emphasis on the novel's theme of 'femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness', has led to a vast body of criticism focused on the novel's female characters; however, few scholars<sup>4</sup> have addressed the role Dangarembga's male characters play in this discussion of gender.

Exploring the construction and espousal of masculinity in *Nervous Conditions*' male characters, then, shares the feminist agenda of challenging and breaking down problematic male/female, masculine/feminine binaries, and it points to what appears to be one of Dangarembga's goals in constructing the novel. As Derek Wright points out, "Dangarembga devotes a great deal of energy in her novel to deconstructing the conventional binary oppositions and hierarchic categorisms of patriarchal discourse, each of which hinges on an invisible male/female polarization, with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation" (14).

The dearth of critical attention to the novel's male characters as anything other than agents of patriarchy functions to minimize the role colonialism serves as a reinforcing agent in former traditional conceptions of gender and gender roles. Using the novel's patriarch, Babamukuru, as the focus of my analysis, I apply an African feminist framework and the concept of double consciousness to complicate this simplification of the colonized African man, and to more accurately reflect the role colonialism plays in the construction and (necessary) reconstruction of conceptions of gender.

### ***Nervous Conditions*, an African feminist novel**

In an interview in 1993, Dangarembga stated that "It was good [for young women of her generation to have western theories of feminism], but I think that we have to move beyond that

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<sup>4</sup> See Holland, 2005, and Mugambi, 2009.

and find our own point of departure” (George & Scott, 315). Here, Dangarembga seems to echo Carol Boyce Davies who argues that African feminism “understands the interconnectedness of race, class and sex oppression.... It is a hybrid of sorts, which seeks to combine African concerns with feminist concerns.” (565)

The African concerns Davies alludes to must, then, refer, at least in part, to colonialism which significantly impacted African cultures, social relationships, economies, environments, and morale. In fact, Davies’s first point in her definition of African feminism states, “[African feminism] recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation” (563). Though Davies does not mention whether or not her points are listed in order of importance, and while attempting to prioritize these points would be counterproductive, the fact that a struggle *with men against* foreign domination is included at all seems to communicate something meaningful about the ideological position of African feminism. That is, African feminism understands the all-encompassing, immediate and long-lasting effects of colonialism as forces that must be effectively addressed if the continent is to move beyond and out from under foreign domination and exploitation. Furthermore, African feminists understand that this struggle will only be successful if African men and women work together.

The relationship between colonialism and the lived experiences of African women is further outlined in Davies’s second point, which qualifies her first by demonstrating African feminism’s hybridity:

An African feminist consciousness recognizes that certain inequities and limitations existed/exist in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced

others. As such it acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies. (563)

African feminism, then, acknowledges the limitations of attributing all forms of gender oppression and gender inequity to colonialism by conceding that forms of oppression may have existed in the pre-colonial period. Also significant is Davies's argument that colonialism *did* introduce new forms of oppression. It is in this acknowledgement of pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial oppressions that Davies situates African feminism's relationships to western feminism.

Situating *Nervous Conditions* specifically as an African feminist text offers scholars the opportunity to engage critically with the intersections of gender, tradition, colonialism, and power as they are presented in the novel in a manner that will produce more nuanced understandings of the ways in which gender construction is complicated, even deconstructed, by the imposition of foreign domination and colonial expectations.

### **Double Consciousness, a nervous condition**

In a 1991 interview at the African Writers Festival, Dangarembga discussed what she understood to be the "split consciousness" or "double consciousness" developed by people, both male and female, coping under the colonial system while still operating, in many ways, from a traditional framework.

...My sense is that in [the colonial situation], one [is] always working with this split consciousness as it were.... [The colonized is shocked] to have to suddenly start developing this other consciousness that deals with [them] as "the powerless", "the

disposed” and labels [them] as such, [requiring them] to internalize this to some extent in order to be able to cope in that system. Because, if [they] don’t accept that label at some level, that system will destroy [them].... I wouldn’t call it “personality” – but more a double consciousness.... (George & Scott, 314)

Dangarembga’s comments point, in many ways, to fractured perceptions of the colonized self. Africans in the colonial situation were operating between contradictory self-perceptions of personal agency and power: one that reflected how they perceived themselves, and one that reflected how the colonizer perceived them. What Dangarembga highlights for us, however, is that the colonized identity was constructed, simultaneously, through a response to colonial expectations and perceptions, and in rebellion against those expectations and perceptions. Even more, this internalization of the colonizer’s perceptions of the colonized is, as Dangarembga points out, necessary if the colonized were to cope in the colonial system; without some form of internalization of colonial perceptions, the system destroys the colonized.

Paradoxically, this internalization of the colonizer’s perceptions is equally destructive. Dangarembga points to this through an implicit reference to the public and private spheres when she says, “So all your submissive characteristics come out when you are in a situation with your boss and then when you go home all the “power” characteristics are intensified and distorted as well” (George & Scott, 314). For colonialism both expected and demanded African submission and compliance. To survive the public sphere under colonialism, Africans had to grapple with the knowledge that who they were was not who they were perceived to be, and that the power they perceived themselves having, did not exist outside of themselves. The experience of stripped power in the public sphere, coupled with the knowledge of this powerlessness, manifested itself in negative ways, most often in the private sphere.

First articulated by W.E.B. DuBois in 1903, “double-consciousness” is a concept used to describe the “twoness” African Americans experienced from the never-ending awareness that who they knew themselves to be was not what others – non-blacks, especially those in positions of power and authority – perceived them or believed them to be. To explain double-consciousness, DuBois used the concept of the “veil,” which is explained here by Howard Winant:

Du Bois understands the veil dialectically. This philosophical term "dialectic" refers to a relationship that simultaneously embodies both antagonism and interdependence, that develops over historical time, and that links the small-scale and large-scale (or "micro" and "macro") dimensions of social life. The concept represented by Du Bois as the veil, in other words, operates both at the level of the personal or intrapsychic and at the institutional or structural level of social interaction. It evolves over historical time. And it expresses both the conflict, exclusion, and alienation inherent in the dynamics of race and racism, and the interdependence, knowledge of "the other," and thwarted desires that characterize these phenomena. (Winant, 1)

Though African Americans were not colonized in the sense that Zimbabweans were, Winant’s description of the veil complements Dangarembga’s discussion above, offering a nuanced explanation of the complex relationship of the colonized with conceptions of power by emphasizing how personal and social conceptions (and perceptions) of that relationship became conflated.

Dangarembga states that conceptions of power become “intensified and distorted,” especially in the home due to this double-consciousness, and responded enthusiastically when

asked if her character Babamukuru represents the “perfect example of this ‘double consciousness’ under colonialism”:

Yes, precisely. That was my intention actually in constructing him. I mean, nobody likes to admit the violence we do to ourselves. And many people – many men – do act this way. You can’t say they don’t.... This kind of brutality and violence which is the result of violence that was instigated outside the system has no outlet except for such distortions. (315)

Despite Dangarembga’s identifying the colonized identity in terms of double-consciousness, and despite her statement about consciously constructing Babamukuru, a key character in *Nervous Conditions*, as a complex individual experiencing multiple identity-roles, few scholars have taken up discussions of Babamukuru aside from identifying him as an agent of traditional patriarchy, a symbol of authority/power, or as an extension of colonialism. For example, Vicki Manus (2003) describes Babamukuru as “a sort of extension of white colonialism reaching into the family like a tentacle and exacerbating existing hierarchies, tensions and conflicts[,]... [and as a man] concerned only with “keep[ing] up appearances and [maintaining] his place at the top of the family structure” (30). Similarly, Helen Mugambi (2009) argues that Babamukuru “seems to represent extreme versions of unbridled masculinity,” made up of “negative and deconstructive” traits, and argues that “the reader is hard put to remember a single occasion when Babamukuru says a tender word to either of his children” (205). Likewise, Rosemary Moyana (1994), posits that “whether in the form of father, husband or brother, masculinity is seen as oppressive and Babamukuru is the man at the center of this oppression” (30). Finally, despite acknowledging Babamukuru’s “colonial repression,” Derek Wright (1997) argues that he “is the center of his family’s neurosis, the sick one who stays well by making the well ones

sick...” (14)<sup>5</sup>. The little scholarship that does address the character of Babamukuru, then, paints a picture of a tyrannical, mentally ill monster who is the cause of, and responsible for, the gender oppression faced by the female characters, while failing, for the most part, to address how he is also shaped by both traditional and colonial situations, particularly in regards to the gendered role(s) he must inhabit and the masculine characteristics he exhibits.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on the character of Babamukuru contributes to current scholarship on *Nervous Conditions* in meaningful ways. First, it opens up dialogue about the role male characters play in feminist texts, beyond that of oppressor. Second, it points to how scholars might approach the novel’s feminist project of underscoring gender inequities by highlighting the role colonialism plays in the construction and reconstruction of conceptions of gender for *all* characters, thereby moving towards more balanced interpretations of gendered experiences in the novel. Finally, Babamukuru’s character offers interesting opportunities for scholars to begin thinking about how the concept of a colonial double-consciousness may provide a more nuanced lens through which to examine gender construction under the colonial experience.

In the end notes to her article on the novel, Deepika Bahri concedes that Babamukuru is positioned “in some ways the same as that of the women, [though his story] still tells a different tale that would require a significantly different critical model to explain it.” In what follows, I offer colonial double-consciousness as one possible critical model for explaining and understanding Babamukuru’s tale. I offer an alternative interpretation of Babamukuru’s character, one that seeks to complicate the notion that he is merely an agent of traditional

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<sup>5</sup> See also Bahri, 1994, Creamer, 1994, Uwakweh, 1995, Basu, 1997, Sugnet, 1997, Zwicker, 2002, and Shaw, 2007.

<sup>6</sup>Rosemary Moyana’s discussion of gender in the novel entirely omits any mention of the colonial situation, while others make cursory mention of it only (Uwakweh, 1995 & 1998, Patchay, 2003, Mugambi, 2009).

patriarchy, a symbol of authority/power, or an extension of colonialism. I argue that Babamukuru's character is prescribed a number of gendered roles for him to inhabit that prove to be overwhelming for him. As will be evidenced, such a reading works to emphasize the African feminist nature of *Nervous Conditions* by underscoring the complexities gender poses for not only women, but also men coping under colonialism. I posit that these complexities are best evidenced in the text in three ways: in Babamukuru's response to his "nearly divine" status amongst his family, when one examines his masculine characteristics, and in his role as a father as he interacts with his daughter Nyasha and niece Tambu.

**Babamukuru: "As nearly divine as any human could hope to be."**

Babamukuru is situated as the hope of his family, the provider, and the savior who will relieve the "meagerness of his family's existence" (19). His decision to continue his education in England, despite his not wanting to leave the mission, his mother, and family, seems to be entirely predicated on this fact. We are told that

to decline the scholarship would have been a form of suicide. The missionaries would have been annoyed by his ingratitude. He would have fallen from grace with them and they would have taken under their wings another promising young African in his place. Unable to obtain the necessary qualifications at home, he had no alternative but to uproot himself for a period of five years in order to retain the position that would enable him, in due course, to remove himself and both his families from the mercy of nature and charitable missionaries. (14)

Babamukuru's overwhelming responsibilities are not only to his immediate family, but to every single member of his extended family, young and old. His decision, then, to leave the mission for

England, in many ways, must be understood as a personal sacrifice that will eventually help his wider family gain self-sufficiency. Yet, if Babamukuru is his family's guardian angel, the missionaries (read colonizers) are God, and they always have the power to cast Babamukuru out of their heaven. Thus, Babamukuru's desire to see his family gain self-sufficiency must also be understood as an acknowledgement of his own limitations. While he has the "opportunity" to study overseas, which has the potential to help his family, the fact that he has little choice in the matter – he knows he will be replaced and lose his position if he refuses – highlights his awareness of the limitations of his powers and what he is capable of achieving for himself and his family in this colonial situation. Such knowledge also points to Babamukuru's double-consciousness, which seems to demonstrate his understanding of the expectations placed on him, while simultaneously acknowledging, if only to himself, his powerlessness to consistently meet those expectations. This is evident in a scene early on in the novel when Babamukuru returns from England, and speaks about the family's problems. We are told that

Babamukuru [pointed out] that as an *individual* he had done what he could for the family's status by obtaining a Master's Degree.... [While his branch of the family could feel proud] it was time for the members [of the family] to put their heads together to think of means of ensuring the prosperity of each branch of the family. (44, italics mine)

Babamukuru's concern about his family's future prosperity indicates his acceptance of his role as the family patriarch, but it also seems to point to his desire to see his family members, especially his brother Jeremiah, take some responsibility for their own well-being. Babamukuru's acknowledgement that he has done what he can highlights his understanding of his own limitations as family "savior" and provider and points to his double-consciousness and the beginning of his own "nervous condition."

Babamukuru's role as family provider is dictated not only by the opportunities made available to him, but also by his identity as a Shona man. Traditional Shona family structuring places responsibility for the family's provision squarely on the shoulders of the oldest son, especially if the father is gone, injured, ill or elderly. Babamukuru accepts and takes this role seriously, despite the overwhelming demands placed on him by his family, for he recognizes that his proximity to the colonial world has offered him opportunities not available to the rest of the Sigauke clan. As such, he does his best to meet his family's needs by buying an ox-plough to reduce work in the fields, hiring Takesure to help Jeremiah with the farm work once Nhamo has left for mission school, developing a plan to ensure the prosperity of each family branch, paying Tambudzai's and Nhamo's school fees, finding Lucia a job, providing Christmas food and drink for the entire family, giving Jeremiah a house, and settling family disputes.

Babamukuru accepts his role as family provider given his birth order, the educational opportunities he has received, and his proximity to the colonial world, despite the incredible burden such a role places on him, and despite his inability to get out from under that burden. However, Babamukuru's acceptance of this role is complicated by his double-consciousness, which manifests in his knowledge that his successes in the colonial world and any "power" bestowed on him from that world are uncertain, unpredictable, and can disappear without a moment's notice. Babamukuru knows that any success he may achieve is obtained not only through his hard work, but through his compliance, his silence, his emasculation, and his willingness to undo himself in the colonial sphere. As is evident, such knowledge creates for Babamukuru his own "nervous condition," one that is fueled by the knowledge that at any moment everything around him could fall apart, and he will have failed not only himself, but his entire family, and their families as well.

As mentioned earlier, Babamukuru's role as family provider was determined first by his gender, then his birth order (he is the first born), a common occurrence in cultures all over the world. However, it is important to emphasize that this traditional role was made all the more complex by the colonial situation. Babamukuru's proximity to the colonial world accords him privilege and becomes the means by which his entire family is able to survive. This is especially true given the effects of colonialism on work practices. Most pre-colonial Zimbabwean societies were farming communities, largely dependent on their land and livestock, especially cattle. Babamukuru's mother tells Tambu, "Your family did not always live here, did not move to this place until after the time that I was married to your grandfather. We lived up in Chipinge, where the soil is ripe and your great-grandfather was a rich man in the currency of those days, having many fat herd of cattle, large fields and four wives who worked hard to produce bountiful harvests" (18). The colonial situation, however, significantly affected access to Zimbabwean's primary source of food and work by dispossessing the Shona of their land and giving it to white settlers. The text explains how Babamukuru's family came to the homestead:

Wizards well versed in treachery and black magic came from the south and forced the people from the land. On donkey, on foot, on horse, on ox-cart, the people looked for a place to live. But the wizards were avaricious and grasping; there was less and less land for the people. At last the people came upon the grey, sandy soil of the homestead, so stony and barren that the wizards would not use it. There they built a home. (18)

It is evident that colonialism significantly impacted Babamukuru's role as family provider by eliminating the means by which his family had traditionally provided for themselves: through farming and livestock. The sandy, infertile soil of the homestead would make crop production extremely difficult, and would severely impact the health of their livestock due to the lack of

viable plant life. As a result, the men in Babamukuru's family would be forced to seek work away from the homestead to supplement what crops they were able to grow in the poor soil. This work, in urban centers, maintained and controlled by members of the colonizing class, was usually demeaning. Speaking specifically about the situation in South Africa, but relevant to our discussion of Zimbabwe, Robert Morrell argues that wage-earning activities made available to Africans in urban spaces were considered in traditional spaces as "menial, brutal or unmanly" (623). This is evidenced in the text when we are told that Babamukuru's father is killed in the mines, where he had "been enticed into slavery" to find gold for the "wizards" (18-19). Egodi Uchendu, speaking specifically about Zimbabwe, has argued that when Shona men entered urban spaces in search of work they "lacked autonomy over the type of work they did" and often were forced to fill roles that were traditionally thought of as feminine (90) to both Shona men and the colonizers. Therefore, Babamukuru's position as Headmaster of the mission school and Academic Director of the Church's Manicaland Region (42), a respectable, safe, and well-paid position of authority, when such jobs were unheard of for Africans, provides his family with all the more reason to depend on him, while his success navigating the "wizard's world" of the British provides all the more reason for them to be in awe of him.

Babamukuru's role as provider is further complicated by the ways in which his passage into the colonized world has made him unknowable to his family. Babamukuru is positioned as a "royal" provider without whom the entire family would perish. This "divine" status has taken on epic proportions in the minds of his family members, for he is understood to have something special, luck, perhaps (5), that enables him to overcome and succeed despite the difficulties imposed by the outside world. We are told by Tambu that upon visiting Babamukuru at the mission for the first time, she realizes that "my Babamukuru was not the person I thought he

was.... I felt separated forever from my uncle” (64). Later, she tells us that Babamukuru’s “identity was elusive” (102). Initially, Tambu assumes that “it would be like the good old days, the days before England, with Babamukuru throwing us in the air and catching us and giving us sweets... but I hardly ever saw him because he was so busy. We hardly ever laughed with Babamukuru was within earshot, because, Maiguru said, his nerves were bad. His nerves were bad because he was so busy.”

Babamukuru’s identity is elusive on the one hand because his experiences, especially those experiences he had in England, are unknowable to everyone but his wife and children. His extended family have no frame of reference for understanding how his time overseas has changed him. In fact, Tambu tells us that all she remembers about Babamukuru going to England was that “everybody was very excited and very impressed by the event” (13).

Babamukuru’s elusive identity stems first from the ways in which it has become an abstraction to his family. They view him merely as “the provider” of their needs, as the “nearly divine” provider of their needs, allowing that role to subsume all others. When Babamukuru returns from England, Jeremiah shouts, “Hezvo! Do you see him? Our returning *prince*. Do you see him? Observe him well. He has returned. Our *father* and *benefactor* has returned...” (36). Later, Tete exclaims, “Thank you, muera bonga. Muera bonga<sup>7</sup>, we thank you. Would we, *could we survive without you? Truly, we could not!*” (47, italics mine). Throughout the novel, Babamukuru is described as persevering, knowledgeable, intelligent, disciplined, hard-working, prosperous, dignified, educated, the “returning hero” (36), “inspiring” (44), “different,” “completely dignified” (50), bold, determined, full of power, kind, “a man of consequence” (64),

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<sup>7</sup> A phrase used in Shona praise poetry.

wealthy, “impressive,” “good,” “right” (87), stoic, divine, “valiant” (131), “gracious” (143), magnanimous, “wise” (144), endearing, and “as nearly divine as any human could hope to be” (164). Babamukuru’s transformation, in the eyes of his family, from a regular man, to a nearly-divine savior, further highlights how he has been stripped of an autonomous identity and points to the pressures responsible for creating his own “nervous condition.” Overwhelming expectations and impossible roles replace what would have been his identity. Juxtaposed with his position in the colonial sphere, the complex and insurmountable situation with which Babamukuru is faced becomes clear.

Babamukuru’s nervous condition is evident in his awareness of this clash, and is unmistakable in his response to family members when they thank him. When Aunt Tete thanks Babamukuru for sending Nhamo to school, and admonishes Jeremiah to do the same, Babamukuru responds, “Do not thank me, do not thank me! There is nothing surprising here. Where there is a duty to do, it has to be done, that is all” (47). Babamukuru’s acknowledgement of duty demonstrates his acceptance of responsibility, but it also points to his lack of choice in the matter because no one else in the family is in a position to fulfill these duties. When Babamukuru finds Lucia a job, he responds to the thanks he receives by saying, “Stand up, stand up. Do not thank me. Lucia is the one who will be doing the work” (159). Babamukuru’s eschewal of thanks is always followed with an attempt to shift responsibility away from himself. His access to the colonial world can help Lucia get a job, but it cannot help her keep the job, nor can it ensure her success through working. When Babamukuru agrees to send Tambu to the private convent school, Sacred Heart, he responds to exclamations of gratitude by saying, “No, do not thank me. It is Tambu who worked hard for the scholarship” (183). Though tradition requires his permission, Babamukuru’s acknowledgement of Tambu’s hard work in earning the

scholarship points to his understanding of the limitations of his own power. Despite his status at the mission, it is highly unlikely that Babamukuru could have guaranteed the acceptance of Tambu to the prestigious private school to which she is granted her scholarship. He simply doesn't hold that kind of authority in the public, that is, the colonial-controlled, sphere.

For Babamukuru's authority exists only in the private sphere, among his family. He is not free to make decisions in the public sphere where the colonial world rules, neither is he free to make objections or change/improve situations. This was true when his desire to stay near his aging mother is overridden by his powerlessness against the leaders of the mission school who strong-arm him into attending graduate school overseas, and it is true when he takes Tambu to Sacred Heart. We are told that the anticipation of arriving at Sacred Heart is met with disappointment (194). The nun who meets Babamukuru, Maiguru, Nyasha and Tambu at the door and promptly forgets who is who leads them through the dorm telling them, "All the first-formers live on this corridor... And the Africans live in here" (194). We are told that the room is not big enough for the "six beds that stood in it... so closely arranged that there was barely space to walk between them" (194). Babamukuru meekly protests the over-crowding of the room saying, "I have been wondering, Sister... I was under the impression that the girls sleep four to a room, but I see there are six beds here" (194). The nun replies, unapologetically; in fact, she seems quite proud of the fact that they "have more Africans" than expected and as a result had to "put them all in here" (194). Babamukuru responds, again meekly, by stating, "There are only four wardrobes" (194) and is quickly dismissed by the nun who cannot pronounce his name correctly (194).

Babamukuru has no authority in the colonial sphere. In fact, even his objections to Tambu's new living environment are phrased as observations rather than true complaints.

Though his objections are valid, Babamukuru's knowledge of his position in the colonial world is evident in his acceptance of his powerlessness to change the situation. Even more telling are Babamukuru's actions following this encounter. Rather than arguing with the nun about Tambu's rights as a student at Sacred Heart, his actions seem to concede to the fact that neither Tambu nor himself have any rights in this space whatsoever. Instead, he tells Tambu, "...let us help you get settled" (194), and then engages in the non-threatening traditionally female task of making Tambu's bed, reinforcing both Morrell's and Uchendu's earlier cited arguments about the roles available to African men in colonial urban spaces. By engaging in this domestic task, Babamukuru acknowledges his powerlessness and lack of authority in the colonial sphere, as well as his own emasculation. For Babamukuru is powerless to do anything to help Tambu in this situation, except to endeavor to make her bed comfortable. It is not a stretch, then, to read Babamukuru's powerlessness in this situation as a metaphor for his nervous condition. Though he understands that he is powerless to do anything to help his family as they suffer from the effects of colonialism and poverty, a colonial-induced poverty as I have mentioned, he also understands that because of the privileges accorded him, he must do what he can to make their existence a bit more comfortable – despite the enormity of such a task and despite the cost it has on him.

Babamukuru's double consciousness, then, manifests through the fissures and cracks created by his conflicting position as colonized subject and family divinity. In some passive and understated ways, Babamukuru expresses a comprehension of his own limitations, thereby "undoing," at least for himself, some of who he is and what he is assumed capable of achieving. Beyond manifesting in Babamukuru's acknowledgement of his own limitations, his double consciousness causes real psychological damage that is evident in his increasingly stressed and

rigid demeanor. Before his leaving for England, Babamukuru is described as light-hearted, throwing his nieces and nephews into the air, catching them, and giving them sweets (102). Upon his return, however, we are told that he works constantly and is rarely seen (102). Tambu describes it in this way: “We hardly ever laughed when Babamukuru was within earshot, because, Maiguru said, his nerves were bad. His nerves were bad because he was so busy. For the same reason we did not talk much when he was around either” (102).

Babamukuru’s bad nerves are further evidence of his double consciousness and must be understood as his psychological response to the debilitating situation colonialism created for him. The effects of the stress imposed on Babamukuru by his responsibilities at the mission become clear when he leaves the mission to return to the homestead for Christmas. We are told that he hums as he drives, that he chuckles as he tells stories of his boyhood. Tambu tells us that, “unaccountable, unusually, Babamukuru was happy. *Free of tension* and in the best of spirits, he looked younger and more lovable *than he ever did at the mission*” (122-123, italics mine). Babamukuru’s responsibilities at the mission keep him in a constant state of tension and stress. Additionally, his role on the mission requires him to live in a constant state of double-consciousness, of constantly and simultaneously experiencing both an awareness of his responsibility to his family as the oldest and most educated male and the impossibility of the colonial world ever acknowledging or treating him as a “man”. As DuBois describes it, Babamukuru’s double-consciousness can be described as a “peculiar sensation... of always looking at [him]self through the eyes of others, of measuring [his] soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (8). Babamukuru’s masculinity, his performance of masculine characteristics, points to his double-consciousness and the oppression he experiences as a colonized African man.

## **Babamukuru, the hegemonic masculine**

*Nervous Conditions* calls for a discussion of Babamukuru's masculinity when Tambu tells us, "I wanted my father and Nhamo to stand up straight like Babamukuru, but they always looked as though they were cringing. The picture was frightening... For from my grandmother's history lessons, I knew that my father and brother suffered painfully under the evil wizard's spell" (49-50), both on the homestead and in the public sphere. Babamukuru can be understood as representing a form of hegemonic masculinity, a role that reinforces his status as patriarch of his family. I argue, however, that Babamukuru's hegemonic masculinity (which exists only on the homestead and in the private sphere) must also be understood as a concession to and support of the larger colonial hegemony, thereby undoing itself from traditional conceptions of masculinity.

I want to begin this discussion by arguing that Babamukuru's public speaking skills – although a part of traditional conceptions of African masculinity – work to reaffirm his hegemonic masculinity. Additionally, his actions and words are used to either validate or delegitimize the thoughts and actions of the other male characters in the text, depending on how he needs to maintain his representation of hegemonic masculinity, reinforce his position of power and authority in his family, and support the larger colonial hegemonic discourse.

We are told that Babamukuru is a compelling speaker who "inspired confidence and obedience" (44). Uchendu's examination of African masculinities explains the importance of public speaking skills to notions of masculinity among pre-colonial and colonial Shona. She writes, "Pre-colonial Shona masculinity was determined by an ability to 'perform', actually to manifest verbal skills. A young boy who could 'perform' by speaking convincingly and winning

arguments was a man, while an older male person lacking verbal skills was a child and was often excluded in male gatherings” (9).

In fact, it is through his great oratory skills that Babmukuru reinforces his hegemonic masculinity in conversations and interactions with his younger brother Jeremiah. Kathryn Holland argues that Jeremiah represents the “early colonial native condition,” pointing to his impotence, his uselessness, the decrepit state of the homestead and the fact that “he is ready to obey every command issued from his brother’s mouth whether or not it contradicts what he himself has said” (125-6). Babamukuru also points to Jeremiah’s uselessness, often reprimanding him by saying things like, “Jeremiah, that is not a useful contribution. We must look for useful solutions. We cannot afford to dream” (44), and “you are disappointing me. Every time you speak, senseless things come out of your mouth” (146). Babamukuru’s words to Jeremiah situate himself as grounded and logical, while positioning Jeremiah as an idiot-dreamer who has nothing useful to contribute. Interestingly, Jeremiah doesn’t deny Babamukuru’s observation; instead he acknowledges it, thereby reinforcing Babamukuru’s privileged position as the “real” man of the family. Jeremiah’s assertion of some point and Babamukuru’s dismissal of that point occurs many times throughout the novel. At each dismissal, Jeremiah acknowledges Babamukuru as the “real” man of the family by conceding to Babamukuru’s opinion, thereby reinforcing his own inferiority and subsequent position in the family’s hierarchy of masculinities.

Babamukuru’s ability to speak convincingly reinforces for his family their perceptions of “real” masculinity, thereby further re-affirming his role as patriarch. Because of his impressive speaking skills, Babamukuru is able to dictate the discourse of the homestead, or as Tambu describes it, he “found himself... in positions that enabled him to organize his immediate world and its contents as he wished” (87). It is important to note, however, that the power to organize

and control his world only exists on the homestead. Despite this, Babamukuru's expectations of his family often support the colonial hegemony.

Babamukuru's hegemonic masculinity among his family and on the homestead serves and supports the colonial hegemony, particularly in regard to the colonial Christian ethics he adopted as a child on the mission. We are told that Babamukuru excelled at the mission because he was "diligent, he was industrious, he was respectful" (19), characteristics that make for both good Christians and good colonial subjects. Furthermore, we are told that Babamukuru endured and obeyed, "for there [was] no other way" (19). As an adult and the patriarch of the family he demands respect and obedience, and expects diligence and industriousness from them – a diligence and industriousness that supports his goals of self-sufficiency in the colonial system. For Babamukuru there is no other way to succeed in such a system. As a result of his one-sided outlook, in effect, what Babamukuru expects from his family is what the colonial system expects from the Africans they colonize.

Babamukuru's support of the colonial hegemony through his hegemonic masculinity is further emphasized, for example, in his intolerance for alcohol -- We are told that he is "strictly abstinent, so uncompromisingly temperate that he could detect alcohol on your breath at five yards in a strong wind" (41). He also rejects any type of traditional Shona ceremony -- he uses the term "witch doctors" (146), and he mandates that Jeremiah and Ma'Shingayi have a Christian wedding in order to stop living in sin and relieve the family of the problems caused by God's harsh judgment on them (146). Further, he uses his conservative Christian values to stress the importance of women being "decent" (114 128, 144, 171, 172, 180, 189).

Babamukuru's position at the pinnacle of the traditional African patriarchal hierarchy is not without its complications. Though his masculinity is determined by Shona culture, it is also significantly impacted by the colonial situation in which he finds himself. Uchendu posits that the

Colonial experience compelled Shona men to internalize a masculinity intended to transform and place them in subordinate position in relation to the colonial officers. ...Colonial legislation further eroded the bases of Shona masculinity, leading individual males to construct new identities.... Shona traditional masculine ideals were undermined at the same time that masculinities of the colonial class were upgraded (9).

Babamukuru, then, is caught, as Vicki Manus points out, "between the hinges of the various hierarchical rankings [he assumes]" (27). At the homestead, among other Africans, and in his family he represents the ultimate hegemonic masculinity. As a colonized African, employed by the white missionaries of a colonial government and dependent on that overrule for his livelihood, Babamukuru's masculinity is diminished, if not entirely dissolved. His superior speaking skills hold no sway in the larger colonial situation. You will recall the manner in which the nun at Tambu's school quickly dismisses any comments Babamukuru attempts to make.

### **Babamukuru, father**

Evidence of Babamukuru's limited authority, and of the ways in which the ramifications of colonial contact permeate the private sphere are most evident, I argue, in his interactions with the novel's female characters. Babamukuru's interactions with female characters become more or less severe based on whether or not he feels his own social position and authority are threatened in the public sphere, and/or when he feels colonialism is disrupting his access to

authority in the private sphere, demonstrating the double consciousness Dangarembga referenced in the interview cited above. One such example of this occurs during a fight with Nyasha. On the surface, Babamukuru's frustration with Nyasha seems to stem from his inability to accept Nyasha's brash disrespect of his authority. On further examination, however, it is evident that Babamukuru's double consciousness fuels the altercation. The text tells us that while Babamukuru waited up for Chido, Tambu and Nyasha to return from a racially mixed student dance, Nyasha "capered", "cavorted and yodeled" her way home, stopping only to learn a new dance with Andy, the white son of a "liberal" missionary. When Babamukuru confronts Nyasha about her late return, she claims that she was only talking with friends. Babamukuru tells her, "You are lying. You were not talking with friends. You were talking to that Baker boy. I saw you with my own eyes. I saw you! What were you doing?" (113). Several scholars have identified this incident and the physical altercation that follows it as evidence of Babamukuru's desire to control Nyasha's sexuality (Wright, 1996, Sugnet, 1997). I want to offer a somewhat different interpretation, one that acknowledges the centrality of Nyasha's budding sexuality to the fight, but that positions it within Babamukuru's double consciousness.

In their discussion of father/daughter relationships in Zimbabwean literature, Chitando and Madogonda posit that Zimbabwean perceptions of good fathers entail being "responsible, caring for the family, and fulfilling all duties expected from the head of a household" (174). They argue that colonialism's inception complicated the father-role stating that "the patriarchal role of the male still persists but the relationship to the daughter has become complex" (171). This complexity stems, in part, from the diminished authority men experienced under colonial rule, which made protecting their children, particularly their daughters, more complicated. Babamukuru's outburst and subsequent physical assault on Nyasha stem, I argue, from the stress

he experiences knowing that he is both responsible for his daughter's safety and that he is powerless to keep his daughter safe in the colonial situation. Though Babamukuru's physical assault on Nyasha is indefensible, framing it through his double-consciousness highlights the larger, gendered implications under colonial rule and offers a more complex interpretation of his anger.

Though Nyasha's cavorting around with a white boy may be socially acceptable within the context of the mission and their youth, it would not be accepted in larger colonial society, except in the case of white colonial officers engaging in sexual relationships with native women. Babamukuru must be aware of these often exploitative arrangements given his education and close proximity to the system that developed them. Similarly, Babamukuru must be aware of the ways in which white men were known to take advantage of and/or seduce African women, thereby making the possibility of a traditional marriage more difficult. Finally, Babamukuru's own double consciousness, his awareness of the power of the colonial situation to organize and determine the lives of Africans in ways that are harmful to them, must have caused him great distress when he thought about his daughter alone with a member of the colonial class. Recall that Babamukuru does not trust the colonial class, rejecting the notion that whites can be "friends" with Africans: "You were not talking with *friends*. You were talking to *that Baker boy*." This knowledge, coupled with what appears to Babamukuru to be Nyasha's refusal to understand the impact of the colonial situation on her own life, seem to be what fuels Babamukuru's rage.

Though couched in sexism and spoken with male privilege, the language Babamukuru uses during this altercation points to his fear of and frustration with his own powerlessness under the colonial situation. When he says, "I am respected at this mission. I cannot have a daughter

who behaves like a whore” (114), Babamukuru acknowledges his own social status at the mission, a status he must keep if he is to continue to provide for his family. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the two sentences seems to communicate less that Babamukuru believes Nyasha is a whore, and more that he believes her actions may be misconstrued by the missionaries (read colonial representatives) resulting in the label of whore being placed on her. Such a label, as Dangaremba explains, must then be accepted and internalized if one is to survive in the colonial situation. Labeled a whore or not, the real issue is that the colonial situation has the power to determine the outcome of not only Babamukuru’s life, but Nyasha’s and the larger families, as well. Vicki Manus argues that, “the tensions and frustrations generated by colonial domination and disempowerment, [led to] increasingly virulent patriarchal, i.e. sexist, behavior [which was] brought to bear on the colonized female ...” (29). Babamukuru’s double-consciousness manifests in inexcusable violence against his daughter, but emanates from the painful realization that he is entirely powerless and incapable of protecting Nyasha from oppressive colonial labels, as well as colonial-justified physical or sexual violence.

In another example, Babamukuru becomes angry with Tambu for refusing to attend the Christian wedding of her parents. Babamukuru planned the wedding, believing that Jeremiah’s living in sin was what caused so many of the problems and hardships faced by the family: “We cannot deny that these problems are with us. But rather than say they are the result of an evil spirit that someone has sent among us, I have been thinking they are the result of something that we are doing that we should not be doing... Yes, Jeremiah... you are still living in sin. You have not been married in church before God. This is a serious matter...” (146). When read literally, through the lens of Babamukuru’s double consciousness, one is able to identify the “truth” Babamukuru speaks. Bent on abiding by the Christian principles he adopted at the mission,

Babamukuru believes that a Christian marriage will please God thereby eliminating some of the suffering from Jeremiah's branch of the family (147).

Yet Tambu feels that the wedding would make her parents into a spectacle, "stars of a comic show, in which she wants no part. She explains that she doesn't want to attend the wedding because it would make "a mockery of the people I belonged to and [place] doubt on my legitimate existence in this world" (163). Tambu is incapable of communicating these feelings to Babamukuru because, she tells us, "my reverence for my uncle, what he was, what he had achieved, what he represented, had stunted the growth of my faculty of criticism, sapped the energy that in childhood I had used to define my own position. It had happened insidiously..." (164). Hence, when the day of the wedding comes along, rather than explain to her uncle her feelings, Tambu pretends to be ill. We're told that Babamukuru has no patience for this behavior, calling Tambu "ungrateful" and spoiled (166). When Tambu finally admits that she doesn't want to attend the wedding, she triggers her uncle's "volcanic temper": "You have been having too much of the good life. I do everything I can for you, but you disobey me. You are not a good girl.... I am telling you! If you do not go to the wedding, you are saying you no longer want to live here. I am head of this house. Anyone who defies my authority is an evil thing in this house, bent on destroying what I have made" (167).

Babamukuru seems to interpret Tambu's refusal to attend the wedding as a rejection of his attempts to improve the family's lot. Refusing to "buy" Babamukuru's belief that Christian/colonial ideology and practices are the solution to the family's problems, Tambu suggests that she no longer wants to live in Babamukuru's house. Babamukuru is in the business of espousing colonial ideology. To reject his Christian/colonial belief system is to reject his job thereby rejecting the means by which he provides for his family in tangible ways. Such a

rejection could lead, literally, to Babamukuru's having no home for Tambu. Tambu's rejection of Babamukuru's plan, therefore, is interpreted by Babamukuru as evil, for it would destroy the foundation upon which he built his social position. Such a rejection, could destroy the entire Sigauke family, in fact, since the family is entirely reliant on Babamukuru whose job it is to forward a colonial cause for a colonial institution. If Babmukuru can't keep his wards in line, why should the missionaries trust him with their school?

Furthermore, Babamukuru's insistence that he is the head of his house, seems to represent a desperate clinging to some level of authority. Etter-Lewis posits that "given the pervasiveness of colonial rule and the harsh consequences for non-compliance, African men's sphere of authority shrank considerably" (166). Echoing this point, Uchendu argues that

In the long run, male control in the home lost its potency just as it did in the wider society where the colonial administrators took over the public political spaces and initiated a political structure intended, according to official colonial report, to "break indigenous methods of control" and "to make Africans directly dependant on European administrators" (Weinrich, 1971:11). The dwindling masculine control in the family apparently triggered gender clashes in attempts to re-establish control." (10)

Babamukuru's experience as a colonial subject has demonstrated to him the unreliable nature of his authority.

With each step that Babamukuru takes away from his home on the homestead, he walks deeper into the reality of colonial oppression. Each step strips him more and more of his masculinity and his authority. Babamukuru's awareness of this colonial stripping presents itself

through the fissures and cracks in his authority evidenced in his interactions with Nyasha and Tambu.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began with an epigraph containing two quotes from the novel. The first is from Tambu as she reflects on her grandmother's "romantic story" of Babamukuru's success in the "wizard's" world, and points to the mythic proportions Babmukuru has taken on in the minds of his family members, a role that has proven impossible for him to fulfill. The second quote, also from Tambu, is a reflection on who Babamukuru is, and what he has become as a result of his experiences with colonialism. Franz Fanon argued that colonialism denies the colonized "all attributes of humanity," thereby forcing them "to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?" (250). Babamukuru's experience in the colonial situation has required him to become one thing by un-becoming something else, and this transformation, in many ways, has led to his undoing. For through the example of Babamukuru we see that colonialism cannot be so easily separated from African traditions, and that both are responsible for prescribing impossible expectations on the colonized male. Babamukuru's double-consciousness demonstrates the colonized males' constant struggle between identity and social responsibility within the oppressive confines of colonialism.

## Chapter Two:

### Re-Membering the Dismembered: Armah's Disabling Pan-African Masculinity

The dismemberment of Africa at the 1885 Berlin Conference, a process much like the butchering of a huge elephant for sharing among jubilant hunter kin, marked the triumphal peak of the theory and practice of European supremacy. -Armah

African writer and critic Ayi Kwei Armah understands the outcome of the Berlin Conference of 1885 as the “dismemberment” of Africa. In a two-part article called “Remembering the Dismembered Continent,” Armah negotiates how European colonialism reconfigured African space and time in ways beneficial to Europe, to colonial conquest, and to capitalist industry, while degrading Africa’s land and people through inhumane and exploitative means. Armah’s use of the term “dismemberment” appears reasonable then given its usefulness as a metaphor for the geographical breaking apart of the continent along artificial lines, into colonial territories, colonial states and, then, nation-states or “independent” countries, but it is also quite significant as it seems to invoke a sense of disability or brokenness in Africa, not just geographically, but psychically and material, as well. That Armah has consistently addressed this “problem” of Africa’s “dismemberment” in both his fiction and non-fiction writing focuses our attention to the necessity of exploring the implications of his reliance on a language of disability. As Ato Quayson suggests, “...when various references to disability and to disability representations are seen within the broad range of an individual writer’s work, it helps to foreground hitherto unacknowledged dimensions of their writing and, in certain cases, this can even lead to a complete reevaluation of critical emphasis” (211).

Published in 1968, two years after the coup that overthrew Kwame Nkrumah, Armah’s first novel, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, tells the story of a man who struggles to live

an upright life in the “dismembered” reality of postcolonial Ghana, despite the nation’s widespread corruption, rotting infrastructure, and obscene materialism. The novel is generally understood as a satirical critique of, and attack on, Ghana’s post-independence nation, specifically Nkrumah’s government. Yet, *The Beautiful Ones* is not merely a critique of the post-independent nation and African leadership. It is also Armah’s literary attempt to offer a solution to Africa’s “dismemberment”: Pan-African nationalism.

In what follows, I argue that in *The Beautiful Ones* Armah relies on a language of disability to reinforce his articulation of Pan-Africanism as the only ideology capable of re-membering<sup>8</sup> Africa. Moreover, I contend that *The Beautiful Ones* is deluged with references to – and metaphors and representations of – disability, which are applied nearly exclusively to the masculinities and bodies of the novel’s male characters, thereby exposing a significant, yet neglected, dimension to the gendered implications of the novel. For Armah’s language of disability works to link his Pan-African nationalism to specific assumptions and beliefs about gender, specifically masculinity, so that the African masculinity Armah understands to be capable of re-membering the continent is characterized by able-bodiedness and masculine action. Further, by suggesting a singular, acceptable form of African masculinity as useful to the nation, and supporting this assertion throughout the text with a language of disability and a rhetoric of active masculine responsibility, Armah ultimately reveals what he understands to be Africa’s underlying problem: the “dis-abled” masculinity of African Men. Consequently, I argue that though Armah offers Pan-African nationalism with the intention of contributing a solution to Africa’s “dismemberment,” ultimately, this Pan-Africanism reveals itself to be deeply

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<sup>8</sup> I use the term “re-membering” in this chapter to emphasize Armah’s Pan-African belief in the necessity of unifying, or bringing (back) together, the continent.

problematic as it suggests a form of nationalism that reinforces a hegemony of normalcy that is closely linked with the colonial and Western discourses that worked to “dismember” the continent in the first place, because it places the onus for saving the nation squarely on the shoulders of African men, thus assuming the role of women in this process, and because it severely circumscribes the forms of masculinity available to African men.

To best articulate my argument, I have identified five different versions of African masculinities in *The Beautiful Ones*, each of which exists outside of the larger white colonial hegemony, and each of which symbolizes a form or aspect of African nationalism(s). I refer to these masculinities as “Big Man” found in the character of Koomson who represents the bourgeois middle class; “New,” represented by Armah’s depiction of the early Nkrumah; “Working-Class,” presented in the character of former WWII soldier Kofi Billy; and “Toxic,” exemplified in the character Teacher. In each case, Armah relies on dominant discourses of disability and normalcy to discuss his characters’ bodies in ways that undercut their masculinities and, thus, the nation, and that re-inscribe the male body with new meanings that challenge any form of nationalism and/or ideology that is not invested in re-membering Africa. At the same time, Armah presents the novel’s protagonist, The Man, as the one character who represents the emancipatory, revolutionary Pan-Africanist masculinity capable of re-membering the nation. Yet, to accomplish this affirmation of The Man as the solution to Africa’s “dismemberment”, Armah not only utilizes a language of disability to emphasize the shortcomings and failures of the other male characters, but he initially presents The Man as a failure who must overcome his impotence in order to lead the nation toward its re-membering. Thus, in presenting the solution to Africa’s “dismembering,” Armah, like 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century attempts to “correct” or “norm”

the bodies of those with disabilities, presents African men as a problem that must be “corrected” if they are to be useful to the nation.

## **Disability Studies**

While this dissertation is informed primarily by feminist, postcolonial, and critical masculinity studies theoretical frameworks, for the purpose of this chapter, I situate my exploration of colonial and postcolonial African masculinities and nationalisms specifically within the framework of disability studies. Disability studies is an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach to exploring and analyzing disability and impairment. More specifically, disability studies not only examines the experiences of people living with disabilities, but the social, cultural, historical, political, and economic factors that work to construct/constitute and/or define disability.

Like postcolonial and feminist theory, disability studies is also concerned with the function of discourse and ideology, specifically as it is used to normalize some bodies and abjectify others. Indeed, in the same way that colonial discourse constructed the colonized body as inferior, and hegemonic discourse constructs the female body as abnormal, dominant discourse constructs the disabled body as undesirable and unfit. Lennard Davis argues that “to understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body” (1). Like the bodies of women, people of color, and those living in the global south, the bodies of those with disabilities are constructed by dominant (read also as western) discourse which uses as its referent for normality the healthy, white, male body. Disability studies, then, is concerned with the implications of measuring the disabled body against this discursive ideal of the “normal” body, deeming it inferior, and assuming it threatening and in need of strict oversight.

Similarly, disability studies is concerned with the ways in which medical discourse works to obscure the constructed nature of the concept of disability. Jennifer James and Cynthia Wu argue, for instance, that the medicalization of disability, which harmfully “defines disability merely as a physiological impairment – a source of individual misfortune or the unnatural product of a biological ‘accident’ [makes] considering the implication of ‘disability’ as a discursively engineered social category” superfluous (3). Disability studies, then, challenges the medical and academic tendency to place people living with disabilities as objects at the center of study in an effort to develop methods for “correcting” or changing the disabled body/mind so that it “fits better” in society. Rather, disability studies, like postcolonial and feminist/gender studies, embraces an approach that places institutional and representational structures at the center of investigation in an effort to identify what sorts of analyses and interventions might be useful to thinking about how to reconstruct or “correct” society so that it is a better fit for those living in bodies deemed “abnormal.”

As a relatively young discipline disabilities studies still has quite a way to go in terms of developing theoretical analyses for various lived experiences of difference. Mark Sherry notes, for instance, that one of the ways in which postcolonial studies can be useful to disabilities studies is in the fact that “at the level of theory... it seems that some postcolonial literature has a far more nuanced approach to identity issues than is evident within disability studies” (18). For example, although (feminist) disability studies claims to have produced a body of scholarship exploring the relationship between disability and *gender*, the focus of this work privileges the relationship between disability and *women* while eschewing any discussion of men as gendered beings who also live with disabilities. Of those studies that do focus on the experiences of men with disabilities, they are almost always deeply affected by the discipline’s western positioning,

tending to focus on or privilege exclusively men and masculinities in the west, and rarely incorporating analyses of race. Furthermore, because disability studies has remained a project of the northern/western metropole, it has quite often failed to locate disability within specific cultural and geopolitical realities. Helen Meekosha argues, for instance, that despite disability in the global south being “firmly linked to western/northern imperialism, centuries of colonization, and globalization” (3), this relationship is rarely discussed in disability studies scholarship, non-western thinkers are rarely cited, and theoretical perspectives formulated outside of the west are rarely built upon. Moreover, disability studies has in general failed to provide conceptual frameworks and paradigms for making sense of the many social conditions that cause disability in the global south.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these shortcomings, I agree with Philip Ferguson and Emily Nusbaum who argue that one of the greatest contributions of disability studies may not be its framework for understanding disability itself, but that the study of disability enables us “to understand categories of human difference... [They argue that] the study of disability (and the concept of “disability”) is at the foundation of our understanding of the social construction of race, gender, class, and other ways in which we differentiate ourselves from one another” (72-73). Moreover, as Sherry notes, disability studies has a great deal to offer postcolonial studies in terms of the issues of embodiment (19). Indeed, disability studies has enormous potential in terms of contributing productive frameworks for understanding the implications of constructions of

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<sup>9</sup> Meekosha suggests that one reason for this limited focus on the west and western experiences of disability is because a tension exists between western disability scholars who feel pride and want to celebrate their differences and the horrific realities of the disabling processes – war, (neo)colonialism, globalization, economic exploitation, land appropriation, and racist ideology, for example – present in the global south, processes in which the west continues to play an active role. Focusing on these disabling realities highlights the privileged nature of disabilities studies discourse, while also positioning the scholars themselves as both privileged and complicit in the disabling of the Other.

difference. Coupled with postcolonial and gender frameworks, that potential is even more likely to produce new approaches to our understanding of what it means for all of us to live in and be located in the multiplicity of bodies we inhabit.

## **Disability in Literature**

Simi Linton notes that one of the projects of disability studies is to “remake us as full citizens whose rights and privileges are intact, whose history and contributions are recorded, and whose often distorted representations in art, literature, film, theater, and other forms of artistic expression are fully analyzed” (518). Linton’s focus on representation is important to this chapter’s exploration of Armah’s reliance on a language of disability. For disability has long functioned in literature as a metaphor for the abnormal, and this is true for *The Beautiful Ones*. Yet *The Beautiful Ones* is not some anomalous example of disability-loathing literature. In fact, Lennard Davis argues that

the novel as a form promotes and symbolically produces normative structures...[indeed] the very structures on which the novel rests tend to be normative...[and] this normativity in narrative will by definition create the abnormal, the Other, the disabled, the native, the colonized subject, and so on.... Even in texts that do not appear to be about disability, the issue of normalcy is fully developed. One can find in almost any novel... a kind of surveying of the terrain of the body, an attention to difference – physical, mental, and national” (9-12).

Though Davis’s argument is based on his work with 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, his contention that in nearly any novel one will find “some reference to the abnormal, to disability” (10), is also applicable to African literature. Quayson, for example, has noted the function of disability in the

plays of Nigerian author Wole Soyinka and the novels of South African author J.M. Coetzee. Beyond these texts, disability is present in a number of African literary works, including a “deaf and dumb” boy in Karen Blixen’s *Out of Africa*, a deaf character in Ngugi’s *A Grain of Wheat*, an epileptic, a “deformed” woman, a blind man, and polydactyl “strangers” in Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*, a cross-eyed, clumsy, and “hideously” formed woman in Doris Lessing’s short story “The Nuisance,” and an anorexic teenage girl in Tsitsi Dangerembga’s *Nervous Conditions*. Even Achebe’s famous Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart* exhibits all of the characteristics of narcissistic personality disorder, and these are only a few examples.

The presence of disability in African literature, then, demands that both postcolonial and disability studies challenge the dominant, western terms by which disability theory is presently constituted. As Mark Sherry points out, “disability is often used as a metaphor for the problems experienced by the nation. However, the nature of those metaphors is particularly interesting because the connections they make between quite different experiences evoke meanings that shape perception, identity, and experience” (11). Examining disability in African literature, then, requires an exploration of the ways in which disability and disability metaphor constitute and (re)produce the normative structures and ideologies that inform not only identity, but the construction of the African nation.

Like Sherry, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder argue that disability metaphors are the “crutch upon which literary narratives lean for... representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (49). Yet these metaphors are not merely relied upon by creative writers in literary texts. Rather, these metaphors are present in all aspects of discourse. Evidence of this fact is found even in the work of postcolonial scholars concerned with communicating the “problems” associated with colonialism, postcolonialism, imperialism, and the nation. For

example, renowned historian Basil Davidson refers to the legacy of colonialism as a “handicap” to the creation of a postcolonial nation-state (162), while Ato Quayson has described colonialism in Africa as “disabling the colonized” (228). Disability is a central factor in Franz Fanon’s arguments about colonialism which he asserts is responsible for the creation of “pathologies” and “disorders” in the colonized. And, pertinent to our discussion of *The Beautiful Ones*, in his well-known and otherwise thoughtful essay on the novel, Neil Lazarus, problematically invokes a language of mental illness disability when referring to Nkrumah as a “political schizophrenic” (53). Not only do these metaphors of handicap, disability, pathology, mental illness, colonialism, exile, and apartheid misrepresent the terms’ true definitions, but they work to reinforce a particular notion of normalcy that is antithetical to the project of postcolonial studies in the first place.

Likewise, metaphors of the (post)colonial experience have also been used to describe problems experienced by people with disabilities. As Sherry notes, Harlan Lane argues that the failure to recognize ASL as a distinct culture is a form of ‘colonialism’, Arthur Frank describes the interactions between doctors and patients as ‘medical colonialism’, R.A. Ingram has compared disability to an ‘internal exile’, and Gerard Goggin and Christopher Newell have discussed disability as a form of ‘apartheid’. Thus, Sherry’s argument regarding Fanon’s use of disability metaphor to explain the harms of colonialism, becomes relevant here to both the misuse of disability and (post)colonial metaphors: these labels which have been applied to people are problematically assumed to “reflect objective mental states, rather than subjective interpretations of another person’s reality” (15). I include these examples not to criticize these scholars, but to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of normative ideologies that influence even those of us concerned with challenging problematic aspects of the “norm.” With this in mind,

while this chapter is critical of Armah's reliance on a discourses of disability and normality in *The Beautiful Ones*, I also want to be clear that I am not suggesting that Armah has some deep-held prejudice against those with disabilities – I'm not suggesting that he doesn't either. Rather, I am suggesting that this sort of language is so pervasive that it often goes unnoticed so its implications are overlooked. Hence the need for this sort of critique.

### ***The Beautiful Ones***

*The Beautiful Ones* highlights the corruption, overwhelming disappointment in the unfulfilled promises of independence, and the anger and frustration of discovering that Independent-Ghana was merely an African facsimile of the power and economic structures of Colonial-Ghana. Given its historical context, as well as its content, many scholars have struggled to read the novel as anything other than pessimistic disillusionment literature. In fact, Ngugi wa Thiongo argues that *The Beautiful Ones* exemplifies the post-independence African disillusionment literature of its time. While soon after its publication, Chinua Achebe dismissed the novel as a pessimistic and "sick book." Sick, not with the sickness of Ghana but with the sickness of the human condition" (qtd in Morell 25).

This tendency to read the novel as merely pessimistic is further justified when one takes into account Armah's conspicuous use of scatological metaphor. This "imagery of disgust" has been addressed by a number of scholars who have commented on the novel's "unimaginably vulgar" language (Kakraba 306), its depictions of "unconquerable dirt" (Solomon 26), its "aesthetics of garbage" (Ryan 53), and its "excremental master-metaphor" (Wright 210). Henry Chakava also views the novel as pessimistic, arguing that its protagonist, "the man", is a soul attempting to raise itself above the corruption, but bound to fail. Similarly, Charles Larson

compares *The Beautiful Ones* to African American author, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, arguing that the novel works to demonstrate how corruption signals the "atrophy of man" (Bodunde 3). Leonard Kibera describes Armah as a "cosmic pessimist", while Charles Nnolim argues that Armah's "philosophic pessimism is undisguised" (207), and Chidi Amuta argues that Armah deifies "the power of decay and despair" (54), making him a "pessimistic African novelist" (473). It's no wonder, then, that both readers and scholars have struggled to read the novel as anything other than a profoundly pessimistic tale of a nation's filth.

Despite these many readings of the novel as pessimistic, I embrace a different interpretation of *The Beautiful Ones*, one informed by Neil Lazarus's work on the novel which offers, perhaps, the best-known alternative reading of the text. Reading the novel against Franz Fanon's essay, "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness," and focusing on the novel's protagonist, The Man, Lazarus argues that *The Beautiful Ones* offers an affirmative vision for the future, by ultimately endorsing The Man's strategy of living against the gleam, as opposed to embracing it or running from it as other characters do. Despite being unfree, and living in squalor with no hope for any improvement during his own lifetime, The Man "manages to invest his struggle for bare existence with great dignity, and to wrench from this struggle a note of hope for the future" (Lazarus 72). Lazarus contends that The Man's primary victory is not found in what he achieves for himself; rather, The Man's victory is evident when he loses his ethically superior tone and moral arrogance, and realizes that he has to live within his society: The Man "learns that it is only by continuing his struggle by resolutely opposing the pull of the degraded reality all around him, and by holding fast to a vision of future social transformation, that he is able to invest his life with a constructive purpose. It is his discovery that one has to live *within* one's society and not beyond it" (Lazarus 78).

I appreciate Lazarus's argument, and want to suggest further that the 'affirmative vision' presented in the novel depends on The Man coming to terms with his responsibility as an African *Man*. For the text suggests that if The Man is to represent an affirmative vision of the future, he must first see and acknowledge the truth of his "disabled" and damaging masculinity. Upon recognizing this truth, he must accept his responsibilities as an "African *Man*," a concept created alongside and counter to dominant colonial and western discourse about black bodies. Only in this way, the text suggests, can he overcome his "disabled" masculinity and establish an affirmative Pan-African vision of the future. Yet this assertion of an affirmative vision of the future demands that we explore exactly what that means. What does an affirmative vision of the future look like when informed by a Pan-African nationalism?

Armah has identified as a radical Pan-Africanist for most of his life. In his memoir, *The Eloquence of Scribes: A Memoir on the Sources and Resources of African Literature*, Armah details his experiences growing up in colonial West Africa, and contends that the colonial educational system encouraged African students to embrace a tribal identity (46). Armah explains that he rejected this colonial imposition, believing that "blood could not be the only factor in determining [his] identity," in favor of a unified African identity (46). Likewise, upon discovering that Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo, was assassinated, Armah notes: "The assassination of Lumumba created in me the kind of deep-running sadness... I had long had a sense of myself not simply as an Akan, an Ewe, a Ghanaian and a West African, but *most strongly* as an African. It was *as an African*, then, that I contemplated, then understood, Lumumba's murder" (qtd in Fenderson 50). Later, Armah notes that "When I looked into my psyche, what I saw was a consciousness desiring first of all to bond with all Africans, to live out that desirable bond, thinking of the most creative

ways in which Africans might be brought together, and bending my work deliberately, consciously, toward that aim” (46 *The Eloquence of Scribes*). Armah’s rejection of tribal identity, his espousal of African identity, and his campaign for a unified Africa indicate his early political orientation as a Pan-Africanist.

Armah’s Pan-Africanism is based on his belief that people of African descent share a common history. In “Fanon: the Awakener,” he situates this common history explicitly within the context of the “dismembering” effects of the “endless violence” of colonial conquest (7), and “the white man’s rule” (8). Armah argues that colonialism worked to dehumanize Africans: “We’re slaves caught in a world constructed against us... we are a people destroyed, a conquered people. Conquest is a violent, destructive happening. It turns the conquered into broken, pliable things, objects upon which the conqueror acts, handling, shaping, manipulating them... We’re things, not human beings” (4-7). Referring to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, Armah argues that the contents of the book “are some of the most important ideas dealing with the central despair of the black soul, the fact that black women and black men are constrained to live in a world deliberately constructed to reduce and to *sicken* us, and that as a consequence there is no such creature as a *normal* black person. We’re all *pathological* cases...” (29 “Fanon: the Awakener” emphasis mine).

Yet while Armah’s Pan-Africanism acknowledges this common history, it is also based on the belief in a common future. In “Remembering the Dismembered Continent,” Armah argues that if Africans want to enter this common future and to gain true emancipation, their first task is to unify, “scrapping the Berlin design in favour of a unitary African design...[because] colonial ideology, quite apart from being demonstrably false, is also soporific, lethal and mentally sedative... if we are to wake up from this spell and remake our society and our continent,

Africans will have to... [begin] by rearticulating our dismembered society and remembering our suppressed history, philosophy, culture, science and arts” (27). Armah uses what he sees as his “best contribution” to the struggle, his writing, as a means to navigate his Pan-Africanist belief in a common history and a common future.

Interestingly, Armah looks primarily to the works of Franz Fanon for creating his framework for Pan-African liberation. This is no surprise given that Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* has been called “the handbook for third world revolution,” “the handbook for the black revolution,” “a veritable handbook of social reorganization for leaders of emerging nations,” and “the classic handbook of revolutionary practice.” And Armah is unequivocal in his assertion that “Fanon’s most important book” is *The Wretched of the Earth*. Indeed, Fanon’s influence is present in nearly all of Armah’s writing, fiction and non-fiction alike, but it is especially evident in *The Beautiful Ones* which addresses directly the arguments Fanon makes in his chapter “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness”.

Kwado Osei-Nyame, too, has noted the influence of Fanon’s arguments on Armah’s writing. He argues that Fanon’s “...contention that with the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial state, ‘privileges multiply and corruption triumphs while morality declines’ for the bourgeois nationalists of Africa and Armah’s own elaboration of this Fanonian thesis in relation to the Ghanaian society of his novel establishes an ideological conjuncture between Fanon’s political theory and Armah’s novelistic itinerary” (98). Similarly, while noting Lazarus’s argument about the novel’s hopeful ending, Connor Ryan argues that the affirmative vision presented in the novel “is based on a Fanonian understanding of cultural naturalism, which meant for Armah the pairing of revolution and Pan-Africanism, ‘to create the conditions of possibility of what he has often called ‘creative’ African leadership’” (57). In *The Beautiful*

*Ones*, then, Armah has coupled Fanon's messages about the dangers of the bourgeois middle class and his framework for revolutionary practice and social organization with his own beliefs in African unity and the struggle for liberation.

Yet, the Fanon-informed Pan-African nationalism Armah offers is overtly masculine. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes, "At the risk of arousing the resentment of my colored brothers, I will say that the black is not a man" (8). Echoing Aimé Césaire, who, in *Discourse on Colonialism*, discusses the "millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkies" (43), and Steve Biko who argues "but the type of black man we have today has lost his manhood... [he] has become a shell, a shadow of a man, completely defeated, drowning in his own mister, a slave, an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity" (28-29), Fanon contends that colonialism has stripped the black man from his intended manhood. Thus, he writes, "Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men... the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself" (Fanon 36-37). Armah echoes this point in "Fanon: the Awakener," when he writes that the colonized male could only ever become a man "in the active process of destroying the system enslaving him" (38). Thus, what Armah offers in *The Beautiful Ones* as a solution to the problem of Africa's "dis-memberment," is not just a Pan-African nationalism, but a Pan-African nationalism that demands that African men become *Men* by overcoming their "disabling" masculinity and by affirming their virility through their participation in the project of freedom.

## **Koomson and the Bourgeois Middle Class – Big Man Ghanaian Masculinity/Nationalism**

In another country they would be in jail. Here they are heroes (110).

And yet these were the socialists of Africa, fat perfumed, soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs who had sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade (131).

The novel's protagonist, The Man, tells us that the idea of independence primed the people "for big and beautiful things, but what we had was our own black men hugging new paunches scrambling to ask the white man to welcome them onto our backs" (81). Armah is especially critical of this desire on the part of the national middle class to identify more with the former colonizer than with their own people. The Man tells us, "And they who would be our leaders, they also had the white men for their masters, and they also feared their masters, but after the fear what was at the bottom of their beings was not the hate and the anger we knew in our despair. What they felt was love... gratitude and faith... There is something so terrible in watching a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European..." (81).

In *The Beautiful Ones*, Koomson, the former railway man and dock worker turned politician, serves as the primary example of "a black man trying at all points to be the dark ghost of a European," and functions as the novel's national bourgeois middle-class "Big Man."<sup>10</sup> Armah establishes Koomson as an example of the greedy, self-serving, bourgeois middle class, and problematizes the normalizing elements of the "new" capitalist driven nationalism by relying on metaphors of impairment and disability when discussing Koomson's body.

Armah situates Koomson as a representative and embodiment of the dominant, Big Man, bourgeois, middle class national hegemony by consistently and conspicuously associating him

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<sup>10</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, the term "Big Man" refers to the dominant form of post-independence African masculinity characterized by wealth, power, and political/social position.

with the body, particularly the belly and digestive system, indicating the excessive and troubling consumption of the bourgeois middle class. Noteworthy, too, is that it isn't Koomson's ability to consume that is highlighted, but his ability and willingness to consume *too* much that definitively situates him as a member of the bourgeois middle class.

Evidence of Koomson's excessive consumption is provided in Armah's description of his body. The text describes Koomson as having a "chubby profile" (130), a "double chin" (131), as looking "obviously larger than the chair he was occupying" (130-1), and as having hands that are "flabby" and soft, ideological hands unaccustomed to physical labor and associated with class comfort (131). Kwame Ayivor explains that "Obscene obesity... is a physical attribute Armah [uses] as an index of a sumptuous parasitic life-style achievable only by Africa's leaders and their hangers-on" (62). Armah uses this imagery of obesity to demonstrate how excessive material consumption has been normalized and celebrated by the bourgeois middle class.

Armah also uses Koomson's body to highlight his bourgeois, dominant, masculinity which is confirmed in notions of heteronormative sexuality. For example, that Koomson is perceived as a powerful, heterosexual, elite is evident in his interaction with the bread seller. The bread seller targets Koomson specifically because of the limo he is riding in, identifies him as a politician whose picture she has seen "somewhere," and assumes his virility when she tells him to buy bread for his girlfriends, and exclaims, "Have you ever seen a big man without girls? Even the old ones... even the old men" (37). Though Koomson claims, "Mammy, I am different," the text seems to indicate that Koomson is not as different as he'd like to be. For we are told that his smile "forms a strange pattern of pale light with the material of his shirt, which in the space between the darkness of his suit seems designed to point down somewhere between the invisible thighs" (37). As a consequence, the reader – and the bread seller – is invited,

immediately, to consider Koomson's body, specifically the space between his thighs, and thus his virility, as further evidence of his bourgeois Big Man hetero-masculinity.

Koomson's status as a representative of the bourgeois middle class, as well as his Big Man masculinity are also highlighted in his clothing. Unlike The Man who is introduced as a man sleeping with his eyes open in a puddle of his own drool, in his first appearance in the novel, Koomson is described as "the suit," or "the suited man," an immediate reference to his class position, and, significantly, a reference to his identity as a representative of the bourgeois middle-class. Derek Wright comments that Armah's metaphors "taken largely from the filth and waste of consumer materialism, operate in like manner, invading and possessing their subjects with a thoroughness that turns them into objects. Thus, Koomson, the minister, becomes the suit, shining white shirt, and glinting cufflinks that turn perception into reception" (211). Likewise, in her work on demonstrations of masculinity in African leaders, Nkrumah and Lumumba, Janet B. Hess argues that bodies and the ways in which they are adorned "suggest the coming together of nationalist sentiments, political objectives and transnational modernity" (50). Koomson's expensive suit works as a marker of his social and political position, and it reinforces how the special treatment of those possessing material wealth has come to be normalized in the "new" capitalist nation. Further evidence of this is illuminated when we return to Koomson's interaction with the bread seller.

The seller, who calls out, "Big man, I have fine bread" (36), immediately perceives that Koomson is not like her, a market woman, but that he comes from a special class, a class accustomed to power, money and adoration: the bourgeois middle class. Consequently, throughout the remainder of their interaction, the seller receives Koomson as royalty, continuously pointing to the distinction between Koomson and herself by addressing him as,

“My lord... my big lord” and “My own lord, my master,” and even, “oh, my white man” (37). Koomson reinforces his social class difference through his “playful” and “patronizing” voice which is described as “the voice of a *suit*ed man... forcing itself into unaccustomed English rhythms” (36 italics mine). Koomson’s clothing, then, as a bearer of difference (the suit), and his voice which works to emphasize that difference, signify him as the “ideal” African<sup>11</sup> man, embodying the accepted, dominant form of masculinity, because he is a representative of the “ideal” social position: the elite bourgeois middle class.

Perhaps the best example of Koomson’s dominant, bourgeois social position is found when his body and dress are juxtaposed with that of the contractor. Introduced at the beginning of the text, the contractor is a minor character whose major function in the novel is literary – his interaction with and attempt to bribe The Man focuses the reader to the novel’s main inquiry: How might a morally upright man exist in a fundamentally corrupt society? Yet, I posit, that the placement of the contractor’s story just before the text introduces the reader to Koomson, indicates that Armah intended that the contractor be read against Koomson to emphasize Koomson’s position as a member of the bourgeois middle class.

The text presents the contractor comically; we are told, “In through the door came a belly swathed in kente cloth. The feet beneath the belly dragged themselves and the mass above in little arcs, getting caught in angular ends of heavy cloth. Sandals made of thick leather, encrusted with too many tufts and useless knobs, but then the wearer’s pride had something to do with the tassels” (27). The excessive consumption Armah associates with Koomson’s body and the body of the bourgeois middle class is also present on the contractor’s body. The kente cloth worn by

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<sup>11</sup> I use “African” here, rather than “Ghanaian” to remind the reader of Armah’s Pan-African goal of a united Africa.

the contractor, an historically royal cloth that, like Koomson's suit, should signify the wearer's impressive class status and social position is, however, ill fitting. Unlike Koomson's suit which we can infer fits so meticulously that even his voice reflects it, we are told that the contractor's Kente continuously slips off his shoulders, and that he must adjust it regularly (32). Moreover, the ill-fit of the contractor's Kente also signals that the contractor does not yet "fit" properly into the social status to which he aspires. This becomes apparent again when the contractor takes his wallet out of his kente to offer a bribe. We are told, "When the arm emerged it was clutching a dark brown leather wallet. The wallet was not fat" (30). The contractor is not a rich man, though he aspires to be so, and his lack of wealth, his inability to offer a large bribe, emphasize the distance between Koomson and those like him, and the contractor and those who aspire to be like Koomson.

The contractor's "ill-fit" is also evident in his voice, when he enters the office: "'Good even,' the visitor *shouted*, moving forward" (27 italics mine). Where Koomson's performance of his Big Man masculinity is appropriately playful and patronizing, and, thus, believable, it is clear that the contractor is only play-acting at being a Big Man: He lacks the social grace necessary to reinforce his status as a member of the elite class. Instead he speaks much too loudly, shouting in fact, and worse, when The Man refuses his bribe, wailing: "Brother... why are you making everything so difficult for me?" (28), "I beg you, let us stop joking now... 'they are waiting for me and I must go. A man is a man'" (30), and "But why... why do you treat me so? What have I done against you? Tell me, what have I done? ... What is wrong?... Why do you behave like that?... (30-31). Unlike Koomson who is quite confident in his position as a member of the bourgeoisie, the contractor is insecure and desperate. His ability to reach the status to which he aspires is impeded by the fact that he lacks control over his livelihood – unlike Koomson who is

guaranteed his status as long as his party remains in office, the contractor cannot make money if all of his wood rots waiting to be moved. He must, therefore, use what little money he does have to bribe those working for the train system to move his timber.

Finally, that Koomson is a Big *Man* is emphasized in the subordinate masculinity of the contractor. For example, where references to the “gleaming light” of his “new” limousine, his suit and glinting cufflinks, and his soft, perfumed hands abound in the novel implying that everything about Koomson’s masculinity – before the coup – is fresh, new, and clean, the contractor, in addition to wearing ill-fitting clothing and over-the-top sandals, is described as having a double or triple row of teeth – and anomalous trait that would certainly situate the contractor as undesirable and therefore unfit for the nation, by the way – that contribute to the filmy, yellow saliva that sprays from his mouth and sticks to his lips as he talks (27-28). In this way, Armah presents a male character who appears more like a young boy playing at being a grown up than as the successful, self-assured, “real” man Koomson seems to represent. Moreover, unlike Koomson who is easily recognized – recall the bread seller who immediately identified him as a politician she’d seen on a poster – the contractor is unknown. In an angry outburst, he shouts at The Man who is refusing his bribe saying, “...What have I done to you. Why do you treat me this way? ... You know me... You know my name” to which The Man replies, “I don’t know your name” (29). Again, then, we see that the contractor is a nobody and thus incapable of achieving the dominant form of masculinity Koomson enjoys and from which he benefits. Unquestionably, then, Armah establishes a hierarchy of masculinity, and situates Koomson, as a Big Man, somewhere near the top.

Further evidence of Koomson’s dominant masculinity is provided by The Man’s family who “sees Jesus Christ in him” (93). When The Man tells his wife, Oyo, that he saw Koomson

and Estella (Koomson's wife) as he walked home from work, Oyo responds with "a low cry full of resentment and disappointment" and comments, "She has married well..." (42) and "It is nice. It is clean, the life Estella is getting" (44). Oyo's response, which highlights what Estella "*gets*" from Koomson and his position, illustrates the tension between herself and The Man who, in her eyes, is a lesser man than Koomson because he is unwilling to do what is necessary (break his moral code) to provide his family with the things they need and want. Hence, Jean Solomon's argument that Armah presents Koomson "as the smooth possessor of all that Oyo desires and as the embodiment of the corruption the man detests – the alternative to his own moral commitment" (30). This tension between Oyo and The Man and The Man and society is prevalent throughout the novel, as The Man is consistently positioned as the opposite of and inferior to Koomson.

For example, when, in an attempt to take a job at The Man's inability to act in ways that materially benefit his family, Oyo's mother, after meeting with Koomson, comments, "I must say that there are men somewhere in Ghana who at least know how to take good care of their own... People who can do *manly* things, and take the burdens of others too" (139, italics mine). In another scene we are told, "...he could hear, with a terrible distinctness the voice of his mother-in-law, assuring his son that he would not grow up to be a useless nobody, that he would be a *big man* when he grew up" (124 emphasis mine). Oyo's mother's comments point to the ways in which corruption for economic gain has been normalized for, and expected of, men with familial responsibilities. In this way The Man's masculinity is established as impotent and non-normative, and Koomson's as desired.

Koomson's masculinity can be understood as representing the normative hegemony because his status as a minister for Nkrumah's party, his money, and the power that money

affords him situate him as a Big Man, and as the dominant and normative notion of what it means to be a man in post-independence Ghana. However, Armah undercuts this dominant Big Man masculinity in significant ways, thereby undercutting the normative form of nationalism associated with the bourgeois middle class. For example, Armah uses a story Koomson tells while meeting with The Man and his family to illustrate exactly how disinterested Ghana's bourgeois middle class leaders were in creating real change. Koomson states that a man "who had many degrees" came to give a lecture on economics to the ministers, the parliamentarians and the Party activists, most of whom slept through the presentation because, as Koomson mentions, the speaker had been "very boring" and had been "dressed like a poor man" (132). Here Armah situates the bourgeois middle class as anti-intellectual – they are bored to sleep by a lecture on a topic that should be of great interest to them given their various political positions and offices – and as materialistic and pretentious, judging a man for the clothing he wears rather than for the content of his lecture or the quality of his ideas.

What is more, at the end of the lecture, according to Koomson, the Attorney General, stood up to thank the speaker, saying,

“‘You have told us, Professor So-and-so, of the stages of growth.’<sup>12</sup> The Attorney

General swayed being drunk as usual, and went on. ‘Now we shall share our special

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<sup>12</sup> This is likely a reference to Walt Rostow's stages of economic growth model. Though in no way a comprehensive, description, this model can be very basically as 1) The Traditional Society, which is characterized by limited production; 2) Preconditions to Take-Off, which signals a transition characterized by the intrusion of more advanced societies that introduce modern alternatives to traditional society; 3) The Take Off, which is characterized by the rapid expansion of new industries which yield large profits, increased urbanization, a new class of entrepreneurs and the occurrence of technological breakthrough; 4) The Drive to Maturity, which represents long intervals of sustained progress as the economy moves to extend modern technology, and manufacturing shifts from investment-driven towards consumer durables and domestic consumption; and 5) The Age of High Mass Consumption, a period of comfort when consumers typically have disposable income and concentrate on durable goods, rather than subsistence concerns, and when resources are allocated to social welfare and security.

knowledge here with you. We present... the stages of booze!’ The Attorney General opened his red eyes from time to time and chanted ‘Stage one – the Mood Jocose. Stage two – The Mood Morose. Stage Three – The Mood Bellicose. Stage four – The Mood Lachrymose. Stage five – The Mood Comatose.’ Then the Attorney General fell down. He was in the final stage himself... But the funny thing... was that only the Professor stood there, not laughing even once. I hear he has left the country” (133).

That the ministers’ “special knowledge” is of booze, a beverage that causes inebriation, a physiological state that often results in some form of temporary “disabling” or impairment of the body is significant. That the Attorney General, the individual who serves as the main legal advisor to the government, collapses, having reached the final stage himself, only works to emphasize this point. As Armah uses this story to demonstrate how the irresponsible bourgeois middle class hinder the nation’s progress, he relies on imagery that invokes notions of impairment and disability to show that the men who represent and run the new nation “specialize” in something that is irrelevant to progress. Armah’s choice to emphasize their consumption of alcohol, suggests not only the problem of excessive consumption, but the debilitating and “disabling” effects of excessive consumption. In this way, Armah seems to suggest that impaired or debilitated Ministers and Attorney Generals result in an impaired or debilitated nation. While inebriation is not equivalent to disability, Armah’s choice to have the Attorney General collapse, after swaying drunkenly, sharply focuses our attention to his “impaired” state and, in this fashion, to Ghana’s “impaired” state as well.

In a resounding echo of Fanon’s “The Pitfalls of National Consciousness,” what Armah suggests through this account is that the nationalism of the greedy, irresponsible, self-serving bourgeois middle class is an “impaired” nationalism incapable of leading the nation to true

independence from (neo)colonial rule because the political and economic relationships between the former colonizer and the formerly colonized, as mediated through the bourgeois middle class, “disable” the nation from attaining political and economic power for Africans. The national middle class, then, participates in the nation, primarily, by *not* participating. Armah seems to suggest that their power hinges on their willingness to comply with their own political “disabling,” either by the neocolonial powers who have something to gain from their inaction, or from themselves as they seek to maintain their privileged position. Thus, Armah suggests that the bourgeois middle class is effectively disabled from “moving” the nation forward.

This notion of a “disabled” or “impaired” bourgeois middle class is also evident in the lower class’s perception of the bourgeois middle class’s men. The Man explains that though the bourgeois middle-class leaders were “climbing up to shit in their people’s faces,” the lower-classes (the implication is lower-class men) “had seen their arseholes and drawn away in disgusted laughter” (82). In fact, Koomson and those like him are referred to as “fat yessir-men in jokers’ suits”, “clowns” (82), and as “eunuch lawyers” and “old baboons” who had “lost all theirs trying to be white” (84), by the lower and working class men in the novel. Unmistakably, then, the lower-class recognizes the major disadvantage of bourgeois Big Man masculinity: castration. Bourgeois Big Men are perceived by the lower-class as Party Men who lack penises (because they “lost theirs”), as “fake” men. The assumption is, of course, that association with colonial and former colonial powers results in the metaphorical castration of African men. Here again, Armah invokes an image of physical impairment to describe what happens when the bourgeois middle class associate themselves with the former colonial and capitalist powers. This metaphorical castration also feminizes the Party men, suggesting that femininity problematic to the nation. Armah suggests that the masculinity of the bourgeois middle class exists in power and

money, but not in the bodies of its men which have been figuratively and discursively castrated, disabled by their relationship with neocolonialism, and thus incapable of producing a positive future for their nation.

As a final example, Armah challenges the dominant, bourgeois Big Man masculinity Koomson represents, and the currently-accepted form of nationalism with which it is associated, in his description of Koomson's body after the coup that overthrow Nkrumah. As one of Nkrumah's Party men Koomson, hides in The Man's bedroom to avoid being arrested. We are told that with Koomson there, the room smells like "something the man had not at all expected. It was overpowering, as if some corrosive gas, already half liquid, had filled the whole room, irritating not only the nostrils, but also the inside, of eyes, ears, mouth, throat" (161). First, we must note that the tables have turned. Koomson who had everything, the money and the power, is now coming to The Man, who has nothing, for help. Second, Koomson's body seems to be in revolt against him. We are told that his "insides gave a growl longer than usual, an inner fart of personal, corrupt thunder which in its fullness sounded as if it had rolled down all the way from the eating throat thundering through the belly and the guts, to the end in further silent pollution of the air already thick with flatulent fear" (163). Koomson's body which symbolized his excessive consumption now seems to struggle to rid itself of all that it had consumed. Koomson's fear of being caught, then, plays out in his body's attempts to rid itself of all evidence that signals its bourgeois, Big Man status.

As a matter of fact, Koomson's formerly shining white shirt, a sign of his class position, now has a "tinge of blue" and is soaked with his sweat, bringing to mind the sweat-soaked shirts of the working class (161); his formerly loud voice, which he used as a prop in his performance of Big Man masculinity, and to call attention to himself, is now a "rasping noise" with "the rich

stench of rotten menstrual blood,” signifying the impotent rot of all that he has consumed unnecessarily (163); his formerly large and expansive body, a symbol of his wealth and excessive consumption, “has been drawn up as if his greatest remaining wish was to grow smaller, to disappear...” (163), demonstrating how the paunch that signaled all of his wealth and power has now betrayed him; and, finally, his former Big Man and dominant masculinity has been undercut as his fear of being caught turns him into a child. We are told that he holds on to The Man “like a frightened child” (165), that he “walked like a man without a will of his own” (166), or “like some wooden thing, not seeming to care where it was he was going” (170). Koomson is paralyzed by fear, so The Man must hold and lift him (169), take his arm and guide him (170), rescue him from being caught (171), help him “over the rocks to the base of the breakwater” and then show him “what to do” (172).

Though Koomson’s masculinity is normalized by his status as a member of the national bourgeois middle class, his money and his power, all of which were made possible via his position as a Minister for the ruling party, and all of which worked to emasculate The Man, by the end of the novel everything that made Koomson a “man” transformed him into a blubbing, stinking child, while affirming The Man’s masculinity instead. It is clear, then, that Armah uses Koomson as an example of the “disabling” consequences of building a “new” nation (on top of the rotting remnants of colonialism) when the leaders of that nation serve merely as extensions of former colonial power and control. Evidence of Armah’s Pan-Africanism is also evident in the experiences of Koomson, which seem to indicate that “real” men would never betray their people or nation for financial gain; nor would they be duped into believing that power given by former colonizers was real. Koomson’s bourgeois, Big Man masculinity is contingent on position, money and power, all of which remain under the control of the former colonial powers. Without

them, Armah suggests, Koomson's masculinity is "disabled," and the nationalism he represents is discovered to be impotent, and thus unproductive and ineffectual.

### **Nkrumah – New Ghanaian Masculinity/Nationalism**

"Decolonization is the veritable creation of new men"  
– Fanon

"All new men will be like the old" (89).

Though former Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah is not named explicitly in *The Beautiful Ones*, the novel's publishing date and content make it unmistakably about Nkrumah and his government. As Fenderson points out, "by including the coup, Armah openly placed the novel within the timeframe of Nkrumah's leadership, transforming a figurative novel into an unambiguous critique of Nkrumah's Ghana" (52). Though Armah acknowledges that Nkrumah embodied the people's extraordinary ideological faith in the potential of the nation, he uses the example of Nkrumah to demonstrate why a Pan-Africanist nationalism of liberation is impossible if the leader leaves the people and attempts to impress the former oppressor.

Initially, Nkrumah is described as "new" and "young," a man who is "one of us all right", but who "does not go talking about himself. Only the work we have to do" (84). In fact, the novel, in its depiction of the early Nkrumah, paints a humble, unassuming, unimposing, "rather helpless-looking" man "with a slight, famished body," who, when he spoke, "looked even smaller, even weaker than he had looked at first" (86-87). Jason Lowndes argues that "presidents emblemize what their supporters hold sacred about the nation. Presidential bodies become particularly salient when a new or counter-interpretation of national identity challenges the prevailing ones" (470). In the case of *The Beautiful Ones*, Nkrumah initially represents a new, hopeful, national identity, that challenges to the bourgeois middle class masculinity represented by Koomson<sup>1</sup>.

After describing Nkrumah's physical appearance as small and unimposing, The Man wonders, "So from where had he got his strength that enabled him to speak with such confidence to us, and we waiting patiently for more to come? Here was something more potent than mere words. These dipped inside the listener, making him go with the one who spoke" (86). By juxtaposing a description of Nkrumah's body with an unexplainable, mystical ability to reach into and penetrate the minds of those listening to him, Armah links Nkrumah's physiognomy with his political potency. For when Nkrumah is small he is 'of the people' and therefore capable of acquiring their trust and faith, making it possible for him to forward his Pan-Africanist vision for the future of the country.

Further evidence of Nkrumah's ability to move people occurs when The Man, who was skeptical of this "new man" at first, upon hearing the speech, "stood there like a believer" and "was ashamed and looked around to see if anybody had been watching [him]" but found that "they were all listening" (86). And, we are told by The Man that when Nkrumah, in his "quiet" and "confident" way, stated, 'we are our own enslavers first. Only we can free ourselves. Today, when we say it, it is a promise, not yet a fact... Freedom!', "the whole crowd shouted. I shouted, and this time I was not ashamed" (86).<sup>13</sup> Thus the novel presents the early Nkrumah as a "real" person, connected to his community, an admirable individual who offers hope to the people, and as an "awakener," who wakes the sleeping.

There is no doubt that Nkrumah offered Ghana a new form of nationalism, a Pan-African nationalism, and a new form of masculinity. His ability to penetrate deeply into the

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<sup>13</sup> This depiction of the crowd's reaction to Nkrumah's speech is not a fictional creation by Armah for literary effect. Kwame Nimako notes that "During the campaigns for independence, Nkrumah tended to open and end his speech by shouting the word, Freedom! to which the crowd responded, Freedom!" (62).

consciousness of those around him is not merely psychological; it also symbolizes a potent and powerful masculinity. Where Armah uses a language of disability to describe the bourgeois Big Man, he describes the early Nkrumah in terms of his ability, an able-ness that is linked directly to his virility and to assumptions about his masculinity. In fact, the text tells us that even The Man's friend, Etse, who was known to make "every stomach ache with laughter" (83) with his impressions of the bourgeois Party men, "could find nothing to joke about..." after hearing Nkrumah speak (87). When Etse does crack a joke, it is about Manaana, the woman who encouraged The Man and his friends to attend Nkrumah's speech, "wetting her womanhood over this new man" (87). Manaana responds to Etse's joke with,

'Ah, man, let me wet it.... Let it soak itself in love. Today things have gone inside me, and they have brought out what I have hidden in me. He brought them up. They were not new to me. Only I have never seen anything to go and fish them up like that. He was reading me. I know he was speaking of me. To you too. But did you hear him? How can a man born of a woman tell me my thoughts even before I myself know them? I ask you, how can he?' (87).

That Armah has a woman make this statement about Nkrumah's ability to bring out what was hidden, and that Manaana sees Nkrumah as set apart and different from other men, is significant because it demonstrates, obviously through a heteronormative lens, the potency of both Nkrumah's masculinity and his political message. Furthermore, by situating Manaana, a woman, as the character who best articulates Nkrumah's ability to reach people, and bring up what they had long hidden inside themselves, Armah also seems to imply that within the early Nkrumah's political vision was a role for women in the new nation beyond that of producers, but as thinkers with insight to contribute. Armah's depiction of the early Nkrumah's ability to penetrate, to "go

inside” of the people to whom he speaks, points, then, not only to his incredible presence, but to his virile masculinity, and establishes him as powerful. In this way, it becomes apparent that the lower-class who could not bring themselves to respect the self-serving bourgeois middle class’s men as *men*, not only respect Nkrumah and his politics, but also the new version of national masculinity and the new and more equal gender order he seems to represent.

Nkrumah, indeed, did represent a new version of national masculinity, one quite different from the Big Man masculinity of the bourgeois middle class, and one that developed further after he took office. In his work on Nkrumah’s autobiography, *Ghana*, Philip Holden links Nkrumah’s masculinity to his understanding of modernity. According to Holden, in *Ghana*, Nkrumah focuses “on the male body and the disciplining of its appetites as a representation of modernity” (316). Unlike other nationalisms which stressed physical strength, often referred to as “muscular nationalism,” Nkrumah advocated a form of masculinity that emphasized “discipline applied to the male body not in the form of training but rather in terms of asceticism and privation, the denial of the appetite (Holden 316-317). According to Holden, Nkrumah emphasized this sort of masculinity as a response to colonial masculinity “which already drew parallels between political governance of a territory and an individual man’s governance of his body,” and in an effort to establish “a new and uniquely Ghanaian modernity” (315). Nkrumah’s modern Ghanaian masculinity came in direct response to negative colonial and western stereotypes regarding African men’s sexuality. According to Holden, Nkrumah was wary of the stereotypes regarding African men’s sexuality, and he was especially wary of women, stating in his autobiography that if the African man is to gain autonomy, which he assumes is necessary for the building of Ghana’s new nation, women should “play a very minor part in a man’s life” (126). For Nkrumah, African men had a much greater responsibility: the building of the nation. Nkrumah, then, who

initially represented the potential of a new and more equitable gender order, came, eventually, to represent a neocolonial patriarchal model of normative nationalist masculinity.

Perhaps it was Nkrumah's desire to bring Ghana into "modernity" as quickly as possible, by challenging colonial assumptions about African masculinity that contributed to his downfall. It was Fanon who cautioned, after all, of the incredible dangers of identifying with the former colonial powers and western bourgeoisie. Yet, Nkrumah was, indeed, committed to seeing Ghana become a modern, economically independent state as quickly as possible, and he believed that Pan-Africanism and African Socialism, what he called Consciencism, would make this possible. Armah is critical of African socialism in much of his nonfiction writing, and this criticism is unmistakable in *The Beautiful Ones*. In "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific," Armah identifies several problems with African socialism, and specifically with Nkrumah's Consciencism. First, Armah is critical of Consciencism because it romanticizes the African communal past. For example, when The Man walks across a bridge to a stream, he finds a small area near a dam where the water appears clear, free from the dirt, debris and filth covering the nation. The Man thinks to himself, "Somehow, there seemed to be a purity and a peace here which the gleam could never bring" (23). Though this appears to be a small moment of escape for The Man, the whistle of a steam engine imposes itself on his thoughts, signaling the impossibility of purity or escape. The rot "which imprisoned everything in its effortless embrace," cannot be removed. Armah, then, makes it clear that there is no going back to recover that which was lost by colonialism. Neither is there any moving forward upon a rotting foundation.

Second, Armah is critical of Nkrumah's Consciencism because it collapses socialism and communism, and replaces capitalism in the mytho-poetic system of Scientific Socialism with

colonialism, thereby making it easy to deny the reality of class struggle. According to Armah, African leaders often denied the reality of class and class difference by arguing that there were no class problems in traditional African society (25), or they accepted the “possibility of class divisions,” a phenomenon that must be the result of colonialism, but that “African socialism will eradicate” (26). Relying on the promising words of African Socialism, African socialist leaders, who Armah describes in the novel as “fat, perfumed, soft with the ancestral softness of chiefs who had sold their people and are celestially happy with the fruits of the trade” (a description echoed in Armah’s discussion of Koomson), could sit back and ignore the reality of class difference. In fact, at one point, Koomson tells the man, ““Everything is possible... It depends on the person”” (149), in a statement that seems very much to echo the meritocratic sentiment of so many contemporary western countries also in denial about class difference.

Using Karl Mannheim’s definition of ideology, Armah argues that African Socialism functions on an ideological level, but that it lacks praxis, thereby enabling African leaders to simply pay lip service to the philosophy. This is only, in part, due to greed. Armah contends that African nationalist leaders also become “actors” in a “historic mission” that places them

between two contradictory forces to both of which they are compelled to speak in the same breath: for the contemptuous erstwhile masters, they find it necessary to exhibit their prowess in the international competition of conspicuous consumption; for their less fortunate brothers, they must provide at least an illusion of community, of shared suffering and shared hopes. The first need is met in practice, the second in ideology. On the one hand, an arrestingly vulgar, premature decadence; on the other, a thunderous stream of revolutionary-sounding words, words, words (28).

Though Armah presents the early Nkrumah as a “man of the people,” capable of inspiring people to action, he quickly undercuts Nkrumah’s potential by challenging Consciencism in the novel, by linking Nkrumah to an ideology of revolutionary-sounding words, words, words, and, eventually, by situating Nkrumah as a cog in the neocolonial, capitalist machine, rather than as a leader who put his words into practice.

Though the novel doesn’t present a discussion of Nkrumah’s “transformation” from “man of the people” to bourgeois elite through descriptions of his body, it becomes clear that the Nkrumah who offered so much hope became a “Koomson,” a bourgeois, middle class traitor. The Man tells us that “It is so simple. He was good when he had to speak to us, and liked to be with us. When that ended, everything was gone. Now all we do is sit and wait, like before he came” (88). Teacher wonders, “After a youth spent fighting the white man, why should not the president discover as he grows older that his real desire has been to be like the white governor himself, to live above all blackness in the big old slave castle... why not?” (92). Finally, upon hearing about the coup, The Man thinks to himself, “One man, with the help of people who loved him and believed in him, had arrived at power and used it for himself. Now other men, with the help of guns, had come to this same power. ... New people, new style, old dance” (157). Armah’s contention that the “new” is merely a facsimile of the old is apparent. He connects both the “new” Nkrumah, and the “new” government after Nkrumah with the “old” colonial regime, implying that though they promised something new, “everyone knew there would be no change” (157).

That Nkrumah is no longer a human person is evident in the way that his physical body vanished<sup>iii</sup> once he betrays his people. While the body of Koomson, who represents the bourgeois middle class to which Nkrumah comes to belong, is emphasized, Nkrumah’s body seems to no

longer exist. Armah seems to suggest, then, that when Nkrumah was “good,” as The Man notes, he embodied the hopes of the people. This embodiment of hope manifested in the Nkrumah’s physical body. Yet, once it becomes clear that Nkrumah’s ‘words, words, words’ lack substance, Nkrumah himself is presented as lacking substance or, rather, his body is not presented at all, implying a lack of materiality. In short, Nkrumah’s vision lacked the materiality necessary to ensuring the dismantling of the status quo. Not only is it implied that Nkrumah acquires a body like that of Koomson’s, but because Nkrumah betrays his promises, Armah depicts him as a “no-body.” According to Kwasi Wiredu, in west African philosophy, “personhood is not an automatic quality of the human individual; it is something to be achieved...” (104). Nkrumah’s “no-body” seems to indicate that he has lost his personhood. By stripping Nkrumah of his personhood and disappearing his body, Armah “disables” any conception of Armah as useful to the nation.

### **Kofi Billy – Working-class Masculinity/Nationalism**

*To have a disability is to be an animal, to be part of the  
Other. – Leonard Davis*

*How does it feel to be a problem? – WEB DuBois*

The “body” that Nkrumah lost is given materiality in the character Kofi Billy, who represent the working-class and working-class masculinity. Kofi Billy is described as “one of the lucky ones” because, having fought overseas as a colonial soldier, he had adjusted relatively well upon his return, acquiring work, and even finding some “sort of happiness” in his life (66). That Kofi Billy was a soldier is significant because Armah situates the working-class, and an escalation in African nationalism, specifically in terms of the experiences of male soldiers

returning from World War II. In fact, in his article “African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific,” Armah argues that “there is a dialectical connection between European colonialist penetration and the post-World War II upsurge in African nationalism” (14). Moreover, in his pivotal work, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Walter Rodney notes that

a number of Africans served as colonial soldiers with pride, because they mistakenly hoped that the army would be an avenue for displaying the courage and dignity of Africans, and, perhaps, in the process, even earning the freedom of the continent, by making Europeans pleased and grateful. That hope was without foundation from the outset, because the colonialists were viciously using African soldiers as pawns to preserve colonialism and capitalism in general (188).

Not only did this realization result in an upsurge of nationalist fervor, but also in feelings of betrayal and rage among African soldiers as they returned home. Armah links these emotions directly to the tension that arose after the men’s absence caused a shift in former gender relations. The Man explains, “when the war was over the soldiers came back to homes broken in their absence and they themselves brought murder in their hearts and gave it to those nearest to them” (64). The Man goes on to clarify what he means by “broken”:

What will a *man* ever do when he is called to *show his manhood fighting* in alien lands and leaving *his woman* behind...? What will a *man* ever do but think *his women will remain his* even though he is not there with them? And what will a woman do for absent men who send back money not to be spent but to be kept for unknown times when they hope to return, *if they ever will*? What new thing is money if it is not to be spent? So there were men who, against the human wishes of some women... did not die in foreign

lands but came back boldly, like drunken thieves in blazing afternoons and cold nights, knowing before they had even drunk the water with the lying smile of welcome that they had been betrayed (64 emphasis mine).

Armah seems to suggest that in going to war African men traded in one version of masculinity – the authoritative masculinity best articulated in their relationships with women, for another – one that granted them no authority, but rather demanded that they express their masculinity through violence. In giving up the authority their pre-war masculinity guaranteed, especially as it related to their ownership of “their” women – note the possessive language used in the repetition of “his” – African men contributed to the transformation of gender roles that occurred during their absence. While African men were away, African women became increasingly independent and self-reliant. This independence made African men, in many ways, obsolete. The Man explains that “their anger came out in the blood of those closest to themselves, these men who had gone without anger to fight enemies they did not even know; they found anger and murder waiting for them, lying in the bosoms of the women they had left behind” (65).

While this anger is framed as the result of women’s betrayal, Armah also implies that these men are angry at themselves when they realize that instead of fighting an unknown enemy “they should have learned to fight” so that they could protect their loved ones at home (65). Upon this realization, The Man explains, many men “found it impossible to survive... so they went simply mad,” while others “went very quietly into a silence no one could hope to penetrate. Something so deep that it swallowed completely men who had before been strong” (65). Yet, we’re told, some were able to pick “up the pieces of shattered worlds and selves, [to] swallow all the keen knowledge of betrayal,” and to go out in search of work (65). Kofi Billy is one of these men, “picked to do the work that was too cruel for white men’s hands” (65).

Kofi Billy's association with pure, physical strength and able-bodied-ness not only seems to indicate his masculinity and his usefulness to the nation in physical terms, but it also suggests an alternative masculinity that maintains, through physical labor, what the bourgeois middle class men "lost" in their efforts to be white. Furthermore, Kofi Billy's ability to find "some sort of happiness" seems to indicate a contentedness with work and life, and a limited sense of personal agency and independence. It also, at least initially, seems to suggest the potential of a Marxist-like, working-class revolution generated by the hard work of self-possessing men.

Interestingly, Nkrumah envisioned such a nation created through the hard work of Africans. In his Seven-Year Development Plan broadcast, he stated, "I am convinced beyond all doubt that Ghana and Ghanaians will travel full steam ahead, conscious of their great responsibilities and fully aware that the materialization of this bright picture of the future is entirely dependent on their active and energetic industry." In fact, Nkrumah was so committed to this notion of civic responsibility vis-à-vis work and industrialization that he developed a rehabilitation program for disabled Ghanaians. Jeff Grischow, writing about this program, asserts that Nkrumah relied on military metaphor, emphasizing discipline, to persuade the people that his socialist vision for the industrialization of Ghana could only come into fruition if every citizen contributed to the national economy through hard work. Nkrumah's rehabilitation program was created with this conviction in mind so that disabled persons could "be rehabilitated as responsible citizens, self-supporting and economically productive but aware of their obligations to their communities" (Grischow 192). While much could be said about the Western model upon which Nkrumah's rehabilitation program was constructed, for the purpose of this chapter it is sufficient to note that the program is especially thought-provoking when considered in terms of Kofi Billy in *The Beautiful Ones*.

As a strong, able-bodied, and hard-working man, Kofi Billy has the potential to contribute in a number of positive ways to the future of the nation. In fact, his very ability to work ensures his citizenship and, thus, his place in society. Davis argues that the formation of the modern nation-state required not only linguistic homogeneity as Benedict Anderson argues, but also the standardization, homogenization, and normalization of bodies and bodily practices (358). Using the United States and the development of a bourgeois representative democracy as his example, Davis links notions of normalcy to democratic representation and capitalist-focused industrialism in order to demonstrate how the term “‘able-bodied’ workers came to be interchangeable with able-bodied citizens” (361). In doing so, Davis highlights how the nation-state, through the hegemony of normalcy, requires, creates, and maintains compliant and disciplined bodies to meet its needs. Without these compliant, disciplined, and physically homogenous bodies, Davis argues, the modern nation-state would have great “difficulty coming into being” (358). Though focused on the U.S., Davis’s argument contributes a great deal to this discussion of the forming nation-state of Ghana with its bourgeois middle class and its capitalist, materialist-driven consumer culture.

Kofi Billy’s place in post-independence Ghanaian society is firmly established vis-à-vis his “healthy,” strong, able body. Yet, the text tells us that he “was one day moving cargo, pushing it with his giant hands across some deck when somewhere some fresh young Englishman sitting at some machine loaded too much tension into even the steel ropes on board and one of them snapped. The free rope whipped with all that power through the air and just cut Kofi Billy’s right leg away beneath the knee” (66). The Englishman, we’re told, “said [Kofi Billy] deserved it: he had been playing at his work. Had he moved faster, he would not have been there when the steel rope snapped” (66).

In a matter of seconds then that Kofi Billy is transformed physically and literally from a strong (read manly), able-bodied autonomous, contributing member of society, to a disabled, child-like, and dependent being who could only look “at the place where his lost leg should have been” but never talk about it (71). Armah uses this injury to undercut Kofi Billy’s potential, completely emasculating him. Shildrick and Price note, for instance, that in normative discourse “to be ill or disabled are signs... of a personal failure to match the natural male standard, to be, in effect, engendered as female” (98-99). And Lenore Manderson and Susan Peake argue that “becoming disabled for a man means to ‘cross the fence’ and take on the stigmatizing constructs of the masculine body made feminine and soft” (233). As a working-class man, access to a desirable form of masculinity is made possible only through his physical body and his ability to participate in a system of labor. His value to the nation then relies on his ability to work.

Kofi Billy’s injury, which is the fault of an English man, a colonial representative, eliminates his only means by which to establish himself as a man and as a productive member of society, while it also serves as a reminder of the power of the colonial regime to catastrophically transform the lives of the colonized at any time, thus reinforcing their power and highlighting the limitations of black African upward mobility. As Nirmala Erevelles points out, “How does one value interdependence within imperialist/neocolonial contexts that locate consumers and producers of goods and services within a network of fundamentally unequal social relationships?,” relationships that in Kofi Billy’s experience lead to his acquisition of a disability that works only to increase the gap between himself and those with power (130). Not only did colonialism and neocolonialism present structural constraints that limit African men’s access to dominant forms of masculinity, but they also created a milieu wherein the colonized African or formerly colonized African is discursively, socially, and politically “disabled” by the very virtue

of his or her geopolitical identity. Add to Armah's suggestion of a specific form of national fitness and it becomes clear that Kofi Billy has been deemed "unfit," pushed out of society, and stripped of his citizenship. Erevelles is clear: the nation-state pathologizes disability (135).

The consequences of Kofi Billy's impairment to his masculinity is best expressed in a scene where he, along with Manaana and The Man, smoke weed. When Manaana asks "What do you see?", "Kofi Billy responds,

I see a long, long way... and it is full of people, so many people going so far into the distance that I see them all like little bubbles joined together. They are going, just going, and I am going with them. I know I would like to be able to come out and see where we are going, but in the very long lines of people I am only one. It is not at all possible to come out and see where we are going. I am just going (74).

Kofi Billy's disability has stripped him of his personal autonomy. He realizes that he is now one of many, with no control over the direction of his life. While it is likely that before his injury Kofi Billy only had limited control over the direction of his life as he lived under the neocolonial and capitalist system in place, after his injury what was limited has disappeared entirely. Though he'd like to see where he's going, he is powerless to do so. All he can do is to go along with the others, who also know nothing about where or why they are going. Kofi Billy is no longer a man capable of contributing to society. Now he is simply one of the "blind" and "sleeping" followers.

Moreover, Kofi Billy says, "I don't like it here." Though he follows this statement with a complaint about the smell where he sits with The Man and Manaana, this is also the first statement he makes after Manaana tells him to wait until he could tell himself the truth (71). For

this reason, I suggest that Kofi Billy's statement might also indicate that he no longer "likes" it in a world where his body has been pathologized.

Consequently, while incredibly sad, it is not surprising vital, when The Man tells us that the Sunday after Kofi Billy's wee-induced realization,

Kofi Billy's body was found... hanging from a sheet... The leg of wood and metal that he had was covered in his blood, so that it seemed he had made some strenuous effort just before he died... He had not been a violent man ever in his life, though he was so big and we all knew how much he loved to work on something with his strength. But we never really know. It is possible that here was a lot of violence, too much of it, turned finally inward to destroy the man who could not bear it (76).

The violence of Kofi Billy's suicide is not in his hanging, nor in his injured leg. The violence is in the very system, the "fit"-focused nation-state, that pathologized his body and then shut him out entirely.

Davis notes that disability "is generally perceived as being independent of one's identity as a citizen, a woman, or a parent, for example. In other words, disability is perceived by the majority as a nonpolitical identity" (536). Yet in *The Beautiful Ones*, one becomes aware of how disability is political, particularly as it enables or disables men from identifying, personally or politically, with dominant forms of masculinity, chiefly vis-à-vis labor, and, thus, from participating in the nation. In the case of Kofi Billy, Armah is clear: the neocolonial presence and the structural constraints imposed on Kofi Billy emasculates him," disables" him from contributing to the new nation through hard work, and makes Kofi Billy's life meaningless. Once again, Armah seems to communicate the impossibility of real independence as long as Africa

maintains dependent relationships with former colonial and neocolonial capitalist powers that continue to “disable” the continent of Africa and its people.

Above all, however, an examination of Kofi Billy’s character informed by disability and gender studies reveals something else as well. As Emily Russell notes, “The imaginative rejections that locate corporeal difference outside national ideals are perhaps the most expected deployment of disability in the national imaginary, but should not obscure equally pervasive metaphors in which the disabled physical body stands directly for the social body” (5). Rather than “disabling” Kofi Billy metaphorically as he does the other male characters, Armah’s disabling of Kofi Billy’s physical body and his subsequent “killing off” of that body, while intended to emphasize Kofi Billy’s oppression and feelings of hopelessness in the (neo)colonial nation, also seems to indicate that Armah’s Pan-African project of re-membering the continent has no use for a physically disabled African man. As Davis notes, “characters with disabilities are always marked with ideological meaning...” (12). In this case, it would seem that Armah’s Pan-African ideology rejects a disabled masculinity (metaphorically and physically). Moreover, it seems to reject the working-class revolution Kofi Billy’s physically strong and “able” body seemed to momentarily represent.

### **Teacher – Toxic Masculinity and Destructive Nationalism**

“The impotent talk endlessly of power. Beyond talk we do nothing” Armah, “Fanon-The Awakener” 4.

In “Fanon: the Awakener,” Armah comments that the “catastrophic drift” of colonialism and oppression “could be stopped, if we could think clearly about where we are, decide where we want to be, then act to move ourselves from here to there. But thought is difficult, talk is easy. Decisive action is impossibly hard, and talk is so beautifully cool” (4-5). Armah’s

emphasis on thought *and* action establish a Pan-African solution to his preoccupation with the liberation of Africa. In *The Beautiful Ones*, Armah uses the character Teacher to demonstrate the importance of thought *and* action to the liberation struggle, to challenge the role of intellectuals in the nation-making process, and to reaffirm his assertion of a Pan-African nationalism as the solution to Africa's "dismemberment."

Teacher is presented as The Man's friend, and the person in whom The Man confides. In The Man's mind, Teacher is free, as he has completely disengaged from the responsibilities of family and the corruption of society. Teacher denies this perceived freedom, saying,

No. I have tried to be free, but I am not free. Perhaps I will never even be... I have not stopped wanting to meet the loved ones and to touch them and be touched by them. But you know that the loved ones are dead even when they walk around the earth like the living, and you know that all they want is that you throw away the thing in your mind that makes you think you are still alive, and their embrace will be a welcome unto death (55-56).

Though The Man sees Teacher's disengagement from reality as freedom, Teacher understands it as a sacrifice he must make in order to keep his intelligence, his moral compass, and his ability to 'think clearly'. In an effort to keep 'the thing in [his] mind that makes [him] think [he] is still alive', Teacher eschews all relationships, all responsibilities, everything – even clothing.

The text symbolizes Teacher's disconnection from reality with his flaccid nakedness. In fact, when The Man tells him, 'People can see you like this from your window,' Teacher, who has no concern with the outside world, and who is consumed only with his books and his record

player, responds, ““If they care to stop and look. It doesn’t worry me”” (53). Teacher is apathetic in every way – even to his own nakedness, his own vulnerability.

Whereas Eustace Palmer argues that Teacher’s “nakedness symbolizes his absolute integrity and purity [which] he deliberately flaunts...” (226). I assert that Teacher’s nakedness signals neither integrity nor purity, but a deceptive performance of integrity and moral superiority meant to camouflage his nothingness. Unlike the vivid descriptions Armah uses to describe the bodies of Koomson and Nkrumah, he spends little time describing Teacher’s body other to emphasize his nakedness. In this way, Teacher’s nakedness seems to suggest that an able-body that does nothing is useless to the nation. Teacher’s performance also demonstrates his apathetic and impotent masculinity and his inability to contribute to, challenge, or protect himself from the construction of Ghana’s new nation. Furthermore, I argue that Armah presents Teacher’s apathy as perhaps, the worst possible approach to nation-building and anti-colonial struggle because he is completely detached, not only from the nation, but, like Nkrumah after gaining office, from the nation’s people, his own community. He is toxic because he does not act, and because he does not care that there are consequences to his inaction. Though he is an intellectual, one who could be part of Koomson’s Big Man class or, like the early Nkrumah, one who could inspire people and give them hope or, one who could commit to developing a plan for decisive action, Teacher does nothing. In doing nothing he demonstrates absolute indifference toward himself, his people and his nation. This indifference and inaction are antithetical to a Pan-African worldview which stresses unity and community responsibility.

Not only does Teacher take no action, but he also has no hope. In fact, during one of their encounters, Teacher tells The Man, “I had so much hope before... Not anymore. Not hope, anyhow. I don’t feel any hope anymore. I can see things, but I don’t feel much. ...No. I also am

one of the dead people, the walking dead. A ghost. I died long ago” (60-61). Where Teacher earlier established others as “dead,” and himself as alive because of the “thing in [his] mind,” here he seems to contradict himself saying that he, too, is one of the dead people. For Teacher, others are dead because they are blind and thought-less automatons drifting along uncritically toward the glow of the gleam. He sees his own death differently, however, as a result of his lost hope. Hence Christian Chukwueloka’s claim that Teacher’s cynicism makes his assertions unreliable (78).

Though The Man thinks he admires Teacher, the text challenges this admiration by presenting Teacher as a coward. For Teacher confesses that he has “spent so much time running from [the national game<sup>14</sup>]” (55). Rather than playing by the rules as Koomson does, or conceiving ways to change ‘the national game’ as the early Nkrumah attempted, or even finding alternative ways of working within ‘the game’ as Kofi Billy does before his injury, Teacher merely attempts to run away from it. The Man once asked Teacher “why [he was] unwilling to move closer to those of his old friends who were now in power. Surely, something could still be done by a good man. [To which Teacher replied] Something for which people?... The things people want, I do not have to give. And no one wants what I happen to have. It’s only words, after all” (79). Unmistakably, Armah links Teacher and the empty promises of Nkrumah who had only ‘words, words, words’.

Teacher’s running is also depicted as cowardly because it is impractical, incapable of taking him outside of, or away from, “the game,” but also because it weakens his masculinity. In terms of the notions of masculinity presented in the novel, “real” men don’t run, especially when

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<sup>14</sup> “The National Game” is how The Man and Teacher refer to participation in the corrupt society.

there is nowhere to go. Moreover, this running is not running because Teacher does not move; he takes no action. Armah seems to suggest, then, that Teacher's "running" is actually a willful, passive and very "unmanly" nihilism, unbefitting of the masculine ideal capable of "remembering" the continent.

In his book on the culture and customs of Ghana, Steven J. Salm, illustrates that across both time, group, matrilineal or patrilineal descent systems and geographical space, in Ghana there has always been the expectation that men will support their families in specific ways. Salm supports his discussion by referencing initiation rituals that teach boys "occupational skills... so that they will be better able to support themselves and a family during their adult lives," that circumcise boys believing "that enduring pain will make the boys physically and mentally stronger," and that present initiates with guns, "a symbol of their readiness for battle and hunting, or a cutlass signifying their ability to begin farming on their own" (129-130). Ghanaian masculinity, then, from a socio-historical perspective, is in part characterized by masculine action. Men must be willing to act to both protect and provide for their families. Given this very basic expectation for men in Ghanaian society, and the fact that Armah relies on these social expectations as he develops the masculinity of his characters, it quickly becomes apparent that Teacher has failed to meet the gendered expectations set out for him by his community. Teacher does not protect nor does he provide for anyone. In fact, he laments being haunted by "those I have fled" in his dreams, asking, "How can I think I am doing the right thing when I am all alone and there are so many I have run from?" (59). Teacher's lip service for those he left behind, even if, perhaps, he is sincerely distraught, does nothing to move him to action. Rather, it moves him further away from his responsibilities and deeper into his apathy, further away from his masculinity and deeper into his impotence.

More troubling than this, however, is that if there is a character that can be considered “anti-nationalist,” Teacher is he. For Teacher is more comfortable sitting back in his naked apathy while the people around him make what he considers to be the destructive choice of participating in ‘the game’, than he is to stop them, to teach them another way, or to show them the “right” path. In this way, Armah suggests that Teacher’s inaction and apathy put him on par with the damaging, bourgeois middle class Koomson represents and to which Nkrumah came to belong. When The Man asks Teacher why he doesn’t do anything, Teacher tells the story of Plato’s cave and then asks, “as if he had been speaking to the air, why men should stand apart and disappoint themselves when people free to choose, choose what they want” (80). Though he believes he knows the right way, he refuses to lead, to teach, or to contribute in any positive capacity to the future of his nation. Teacher has no faith in the people of his nation. He doesn’t believe they are capable of better choices; in fact, he believes that they will only make poor choices. Thus, he does nothing but engage in a futile, inactive “running” away.

While some might read Kofi Billy’s suicide as a form of running away, as I suggested earlier it is also useful to think of it in terms of Armah’s Pan-African ideology rendering him obsolete in the new nation. In the case of Teacher, however, running away is evidence of his uselessness and his toxicity to the nation. In “Fanon: the Awakener,” Armah argues that like the bourgeois middle class, the educated class of intellectuals are completely ineffectual. He writes, “Fanon is very plain as to what he thinks of our African ruling class and the intellectual parasites living off them. He thinks they are useless and the best thing that could happen to them would be for them to be gotten rid of” (41). While Teacher is not one of the intellectuals living off of his relationships to those in power, Armah remains firm that his choice to disengage is equally problematic. For there are only two choices for those interested in African liberation: “whether to

decide to go along with this useless and destructive parasitical bourgeois elite or to rack our brains to find a way to be useful not to the system that oppresses our people but to our people themselves” (41 “Fanon: the Awakener”). Armah presents Teacher, then, as just as damaging to the nation (if not more so) as the bourgeois middle class he claims to loathe. For Teacher, with all his education, has the potential to contribute to the struggle for liberation. Yet, he chooses to do nothing. Even former Emperor Haile Selassie, the deeply loved and then intensely despised ruler of Ethiopia understood this: "Throughout history, it has been the inaction of those who could have acted; the indifference of those who should have known better; the silence of the voice of justice when it mattered most; that has made it possible for evil to triumph." Teacher, by willfully choosing to disengage, rather than contributing to the liberation of his people, has made it possible for the evils of neocolonialism and the bourgeois middle class to continue to triumph. He is toxic to liberation.

The destructive and toxic quality of Teacher’s inaction is disturbingly evident when The Man goes to him for advice. Worried that his wife and mother-in-law are being duped by Koomson’s scam to purchase a large boat, The Man asks Teacher what he should do. In response, Teacher jokes, “Excellent. Excellent, man. Remember me when the fish comes” (57). The desperation and anguish of The Man juxtaposed with the indifference of Teacher work to reinforce the very toxic nature of Teacher’s apathy:

‘Koomson is just going to fool them.’

‘You don’t know, man. Just close your mouth and watch.’

‘But I know!’ the man shouted.

‘All right, then. Go and say it. Your wife will hate you for it, and her mother will speak to you of only envy.’

‘But, Teacher, I cannot sit and watch Oyo and her mother getting fooled by this Koomson, can I?’

‘Why not? I would advise you to do exactly that. Let them do what they want. Maybe they will get rich. You don’t know how to make them rich, so let them try.’

‘How would you feel?’

‘Man, forget about how you feel. If you prevent your wife and her mother from getting their fishing boats, you will have two enemies close to you for the rest of your life’ (57).

Teacher’s apathy here, his willingness to watch loved ones be fooled, as well as his fear of making these loved ones angry is not incidental, but actually representative of exactly what Armah would consider inhumane, anti-Pan-African, and toxic to the nation; it is the very thing neocolonialism wants to see from Africans because it prevents Ghana and other African countries from gaining true independence. In fact, in “Remembering the Dismembered Continent,” Armah stresses that Africans who know the truth must help those (in this case intellectuals) who cannot see it:

If I see my fellow caught in a trap, the thing for me to do is to throw him a key with which to spring the trap, if I have a key. If my fellow is caught at the bottom of a hole, the thing for me to do is to send down a ladder. Laughing at the ignorance of the learned is not a reasonable option, because all Africans at the bottom of the Berlin hole, all Africans caught in the trap of the intellectual status quo, serve a purpose that is not our own: maintaining the intellectual universe needed to make the Berlin system endure even as it continues killing Africa” (31).

Teacher’s inaction, then, is actually contributing, like Koomson’s greed, to the maintenance of the system oppressing his people. Thus, he cannot be considered a man of “absolute integrity and purity” because his desire to disconnect from society is motivated by selfishness and fear.

Though he claims to know the truth, asserting at one point that he “can see the end of things even

in their beginnings,” we know that he is, in fact, out of touch with the truth. For example, because Oyo comes to trust The Man by the end of the novel, we know that Teacher is wrong about her hating The Man forever. Furthermore, Teacher refuses to send down the key that will free those trapped by corruption, or the ladder that will enable those who are trapped to climb out of the pit of neocolonialism and capitalism and free themselves. Instead, Teacher’s naked apathy, like Koomson’s greed, and the bourgeois middle-class’s conscious choice to impair themselves, makes him an ideal cog in the neocolonial machine, disabling him completely and making him not only useless, but toxic to the struggle for independence.

### **The Man – Ideal, Emancipatory Pan-African Masculinity/Nationalism**

“The beauty was in the waking of the powerless” (85).

“It becomes more necessary to see the truth as it is if you realize that the only vehicle for change are these people who have lost their personality. The first step therefore is to make the black man come to himself...” -Steve Biko

I have proposed that in *The Beautiful Ones* Armah positions The Man as an example of the ideal, Pan-African masculinity he believes capable of solving Africa’s “problem” of dismemberment. I have demonstrated how Armah relies on dominant discourses of disability and normalcy to undercut the bodies and masculinities of the male characters discussed above, demonstrating the shortcomings and failures of the nationalisms those bodies/masculinities represent, and articulating a strict notion of what sort of bodies are welcome in his Pan-African nation. Yet, unlike the less-than-ideal male characters upon whose bodies Armah ascribes “disabling” characteristics, in his description of The Man, his ideal, Pan-African model of emancipatory masculinity, he almost entirely circumvents any discussion of a physical body. While this non-specified body might initially imply a nation with no concept of the norm, or “normal” body, and thus a nation where any body is valued and welcomed to participate, it

quickly becomes clear that Armah's emphasis on The Man's masculinity reveals a very specific notion of what sort of bodies are welcome. In what follows, I argue that a close reading of The Man's positioning as simultaneously the same as and different from other African men reveals some of the troubling gendered implications of Armah's "disabling" Pan-African approach to remembering the continent.

Armah's Pan-Africanist ideology understands the struggle for liberation as inseparable from formation of African masculinity. Recall Fanon's argument that "the 'thing' which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself," and Armah's interpretation: "the enslaved male was not a man: he became a man *only* in the *active* process of destroying the system enslaving him ..." (38 emphasis mine). Given Armah's Fanon-informed Pan-Africanist belief in men as *Men* only if they are also actively participating in the struggle for liberation, it becomes clear that The Man cannot represent the ideal Pan-African masculinity unless he, too, overcomes his absent manhood, by actively participating in the struggle against the system oppressing him. Consequently, I argue that in order to present The Man as the national ideal, Armah must first position him as the same as all other African men. For it is only by having been "one of them" that The Man can come to represent their potential.

Armah immediately positions The Man as "one of them" simply by calling The Man "the man": The Man is "the man" because he represents every African man, or, rather, he represents the potential of every African man. For instance, The Man is often depicted as "one of the guys." When narrating the ways in which lower and working class men ridicule the masculinities of bourgeois middle class men, The Man uses plural first person pronouns such as "us," "we," and "our/s", thereby situating himself with the working and lower classes, and as separate from the elite. Moreover, when in the presence of his male friends, The Man also behaves in ways that

demonstrate the masculine tone of these gatherings and that bear witness to his belonging, such as his vying for women's attention (84), attempting to "one-up" his peers (81), and cracking jokes that emasculate other men (81-82).

Even more significant is Armah's reliance on disability to position The Man as the same as other African men. Yet, I contend that Armah's establishing The Man as one man among many who all suffer from a "disabling" masculinity is complicated by the fact that while representing the potential of all African men, The Man is also positioned as separate from other men. For his generic name also indicates his singularity. He is "the" man, among many men because he refuses to participate in the 'national game'. Thus, I contend that Armah is able to subvert this complication of difference by inverting commonly accepted societal notions of corruption and virtue. It is in this way, that Armah is able to maintain The Man's difference, which remains significant to the plot, while also demonstrating his "disabled" masculinity.

By calling attention to the ways in which corruption has infused post-independence Ghanaian society so thoroughly that what would ordinarily be deemed criminal and unnatural has become the norm. It is in this way that Armah demonstrates an inversion of social values such that a person attempting to remain upright, The Man in this case, is deemed unnatural and foolish while a corrupt and self-serving man like Koomson is esteemed and celebrated. The text tells us about The Man: there was "something unspeakably dishonest about a man who refused to take and to give what everyone around was busy taking and giving: something unnatural, something very cruel, something that was criminal..." (32), and, "...there was too much of the unnatural in any man who imagines he could escape the inevitable decay of life and not accept the decline into final disintegration" (48). By inverting the values of Ghanaian society so that The Man's "disabled" masculinity is the result of his unnatural and foolish desire to reject the

gleam, Armah is able to maintain The Man's difference while also emphasizing his "disabled" sameness.

For instance, when The Man tells Oyo that he refused the bribe from the lumber contractor, Oyo substantiates the unnaturalness of his choice by calling him a chichidodo: "Ah, you know the chichidodo is a bird. The chichidodo hates excrement with all its soul. But the chichidodo only feeds on maggots, and you know the maggots grow best inside the lavatory. This is the chichidodo" (45). Oyo is not just expressing her frustration with The Man because he refuses to do what everyone else is doing. She is also shaming him for the absurdity of his asserting a judging moralism that covets the privileges that come from corruption without participating in the corruption. She tells him, "maybe you like this crawling that we do, but I am tired of it. I would like to have someone drive me where I want to go" (44). What Oyo wants is not just the material items that others have, but the ease of life those material items provide. In Oyo's view, the cost of an easier life is nothing compared to its benefits. Surely it is absurd and unnatural that The Man refuses to do what must be done.

The Man's refusal to participate in the gleam-driven and corrupt society also situates him as foolish. In fact, when discussing his refusal of the contractor's bribe, his colleague tells him, "Everyone you ask will say the timber merchant is right... and you are a fool... The foolish ones are those who cannot live life the way it is lived by all around them, those who will stand by the flowing river and disapprove of the current. There is no other way, and the refusal to take the leap will help absolutely no one at any time" (108). Like Oyo's point about the chichidodo, the clerk chastises The Man for his foolish desire to position himself as morally superior to those who choose to operate within the system. His foolishness is not in his missing out on the material wealth accepting bribes might bring him. Rather, it is his belief that somehow by refusing to live

the way everyone else is, while also refusing to take action, change will somehow, of its own volition, occur. Like Teacher, The Man's refusal to live as everyone else while maintaining a sense of moral superiority is both illogical and ineffectual.

Interestingly, that Armah chose to emphasize The Man's unnaturalness and foolishness confirms, once again, his reliance on metaphors of disability to demonstrate a man's shortcomings. In this case, by invoking the word "unnatural," which is synonymous with words like 'abnormal', 'aberrant', 'perverse', 'freakish', and 'queer', words used in normative discourse to describe those with disabilities, as well as those whose identities position them outside of the heteronormative paradigm, and the word "foolish," which is synonymous with words like 'insane', 'brainless', 'feeble-minded', 'half-witted', and 'crazy', words used in normative discourse to describe those with persons who have mental illnesses or who are cognitively and developmentally differently abled, seems to suggest that such characteristics are unsuitable for the Pan-African nation.

While Armah situates The Man with all African men, presenting him as unnatural and foolish, and thereby "disabling" his masculinity, it is his positioning of The Man as impotent that most clearly demonstrates both that the Man is just like all other African men, and different from all other African men because he represents how other African men might overcome their "disabled" masculinities. When telling Teacher about Koomson's boat scheme, for instance, The Man laments "... They are using it to hit me on the head every terrible day, to make me feel so useless. And the bad thing is I know they have succeeded. I am asking myself what is wrong with me" (57). The Man's confession to Teacher that he has begun to question himself, indicates an inner conflict regarding his own feelings of impotence. While it's clear that others, his mother-in-law, his wife, the lumber contractor, even Teacher, etc., perceive him as impotent, it is

The Man's own feelings of impotence that are especially telling because these feelings seem to manifest exclusively in his relationships with women. Significantly, then, by juxtaposing The Man's deepest feelings of impotence with his interactions with women, Armah relies on the commonly understood notion of gender as a binary to emphasize, through his depiction of The Man, the ways in which all African masculinity is lacking, while also, perhaps inadvertently, exposing what he seems to understand as the role of women in the Pan-African nation, and the relationship between these women and the "ideal" Pan-African *Man*.

Though it is clear that The Man experiences feelings of impotence in his relationship with his wife – we're told, for example, that though he knew "there was nothing [he] could say to his wife... [inside him the feelings of] "confusion and... impotence had swollen..." (47), he first seems to sincerely acknowledge these feelings of impotency and their destructive effects in his interactions with Maanan. For it is in these interactions that The Man comes to recognize and accept the many ways in which he has failed *as a man*. Moreover, it is in The Man's interactions with Maanan that the text first suggests the possibility of overcoming one's "disabled" masculinity, most specifically, by acknowledging and accepting a very specific notion of women.

Maanan is first introduced to the reader in the narrator's discussion of the returning African soldiers. In an excerpt that reads like a disconnected stream of consciousness, The Man explains:

Before [Kofi Billy] I had never actually known anybody with a wooden leg like that, and he himself was unwilling to talk about it. He just sat looking at the space which the wool-and-metal limb could never fill, and said nothing. Sister Maanan found refuge in

lengthening bottles, and the passing foreigner gave her money and sometimes even love. The wharves turned men into gulls and vultures, sharp waiters for the weird foreign appetites to satisfy, pilots of the hungry alien seeking flesh. There were fights, of course, between man and man, not so much over women as over white men asking to be taken to women, and the films brought the intelligent mind clever new fashions in dress and in murder (66).

Maanan, then, is introduced in the novel, in the same way she seems to have been introduced into the world: amidst the chaotic reality of a “disabling” colonial violence against black bodies, the rage of black men who had been duped into believing they could overcome their racial and social “impairments” through violence and materialism, and a vicious clashing of the two. For this reason, it is significant when she comes to The Man and Kofi Billy offering them wee: “this thing we felt we should have had before” (69). The Man explains,

wee can make you see things that you might perhaps not really want to see... all through life we protect ourselves in so many ways from hurtful things just by managing to be a little blind here, a bit shortsighted there, and by squinting against the incoming light all the time... The destructive thing wee does is to lift the blindness and to let you see the whole of your life laid out in front of you. Now what you see... is not false. But its truth is the deep, dangerous kind of truth that can certainly frighten you into a desperate, gloomy act if the life you have been living is already of itself deeply gloomy and deeply desperate (70).

Drawing attention to the ways in which people purposely blind themselves to reality, The Man understands wee as a conduit to the truth. Moreover, he supposes that wee was introduced to men

just before they would have all “broken up and gone crazy” (69). Hence Maanan, the victim of these violent clashes between and among men, colonialism and post/neo-colonialism not only introduces these men to the Truth, but in the process, she *saves* them, just in the nick of time, by providing them with exactly what they need to prevent their breaking apart and going “crazy.” Consequently, the text seems to suggest the notion of woman as national savior.

As they smoke, Maanan tells The Man and Kofi Billy “to wait till [they] could tell [them]selves the truth” (71). While Kofi Billy’s deep, dangerous truth is that he doesn’t “like it here” (71), ultimately frightening him into the desperate, gloomy act of suicide once he realized that the life he now has is already deeply gloomy and deeply desperate, The Man’s truth appears more complex. As he watches Maanan, we’re told that he realizes that he had “never really looked at the woman Maanan,” and that the wee has helped him to see her in an entirely new light. In Maanan’s face, “there was a softness... that was entirely new to me It was not a weak, meaningless softness. Rather, it was as if Maanan’s face was all I would ever need to look at to know that this was a woman being pushed toward destruction and there was nothing she or I could do about it” (72). The Man’s first truth about his responsibility as a *Man* is reflected in the face of a woman. This truth reveals to The Man that he is impotent, powerless, to save one woman, Maanan, from being destroyed. Yet, as he continues to look at her, another truth presents itself:

She was smiling at me, but in myself I felt accused by a silence that belonged to millions and ages of women all bearing the face and form of Maanan, and needing no voice at all to tell me I had failed them, I and all the others who have been content to do nothing and to be nothing at all all our lives and through all the ages of their suffering... Forgive me, Maanan. Forgive us all if that is possible these days... (72-73).

While The Man initially feels his impotence in respect to what he is unable to do for one woman, Maanan, this impotence expands to encompass all that he has not done for the ‘millions and ages of women’ he has failed. Though it is Maanan’s face that reminds him of those who have suffered because of his impotence (73), it is not Maanan The Man sees, but himself. It is not Maanan who accuses him, but The Man himself. The truth The Man comes to know, then, is not a clearer image of Maanan, the woman he is watching, or even an image of all the other women who have Maanan’s face and form, but of himself, as a man among many men who have been content to do nothing and be nothing all the while pushing their suffering women towards destruction.

The emphasis here on male inaction leading to female destruction translates almost too obviously into a metaphor for the woman as nation, while also revealing the gendered nature of Armah’s Pan-African nationalism. Anne McClintock notes that “women are construed as the ‘bearers of the nation’, its boundary and symbolic limit, but lack a nationality of their own... Excluded as national citizens, women are subsumed only symbolically into the national body politic” (105). Bearing the nation, then, Maanan carries in and upon her body the destructive results of African men’s inaction. The “dismembered” continent’s problem, then, the text seems to suggest, is not the women, who it would seem are only waiting to be saved, the corruption, the gleam, or even the colonial presence. Africa’s problem, the text suggests, is a problem of masculinity. The problem is The Man. The problem is *Men*. Men who do nothing for their women and nothing for their nation. Men whose “disabled” masculinity makes them laughably useless to everyone and everything.

The uselessness of this failing, “dis-abled” masculinity, is further underscored when a group of men, including The Man, see Maanan on her way to hear the early Nkrumah speak. The Man narrates:

...after a long absence Maanan came dressed to make a man faint and telling us nothing... [but] that she had come to be at the rally... [Etsy says] ‘Now could you tell us, Maanan, why you should come and insult us like this, leaving *full* men here to go and listen to *eunuch* lawyers?’ But Maanan only laughed, so I also spoke. ‘Stay here. These old baboons can never give you the things we can give you right here. They have *lost all theirs*, trying to be white.’ Maanan laughed like a happy woman and... said, ‘You people are late. You haven’t seen him yet.’ ‘Who?’ ‘The new one... He is new, and he is young... He is one of us all right’ (84 emphasis mine).

Maanan’s dressed-up appearance is interpreted as an insult; she is betraying, and thus undermining the masculinity of, “her” men by making herself beautiful for political “baboons.” In this way, Maanan’s body seems to exist merely for the benefit and consumption of men. The men’s assumptions about Maanan’s appearance coupled with the political undertones of the scene immediately work to politicize Maanan’s body, and reinforce reading of the novel that understands its women characters as symbolic representations of the nation. Moreover, rather than engaging Maanan in a discussion about why she’s going to the rally, the men merely attempt to undercut the masculinity of the “new” politician by positioning themselves, specifically their sexual virility, as superior. Evidently, then, these men have nothing to offer “their” women – or their nation – but their useless, “disabled” masculinity, and the laughable prospect of an unfulfilling encounter with their penises.

Yet, these men are not a lost cause. Rather, depictions of The Man's interactions with his wife suggest that if African men acknowledge their masculine short-comings and embrace their responsibility as African *Men*, they will be able to overcome their "disabled," impotent masculinity, and to transform into the Pan-African masculine ideal capable of re-remembering the continent. Yet, in the same way that Maanan, seems to save the men from themselves by offering them "just what [they] needed," Oyo's goodness seems to save The Man from his "disabled" masculinity.

Indeed, in presenting African women as a metaphor for the nation, on more than one occasion, the text also comes very close to suggesting that it is African women who are the solution to the "disabled" and impotent African masculinity from which their men suffer. Consider, for instance, the scene in the novel when The Man returns home late one night. We're told that he "opened the kitchen door [and] saw that everything had been made ready for the coming dawn. There was water in the bucket... the coal pot was full," and the alarm clock was already set (97). Moreover, we're told that "without any difficulty" The Man "found his place... on the bed beside his wife" (97). Because this is the first interaction in The Man's first interaction with Oyo after discovering his wee-induced truth, it is particularly telling. For it is significant that he "saw" everything that had been done in his absence. That The Man notices, *sees*, what Oyo has done signals a shift in the way he thinks about his wife. Rather than merely noticing her faults, judging her for coveting the gleam, or feeling judged by her for not being able to give her what she wants, as he did before acknowledging his failures as a man, The Man now seems to *see* some of the many other things Oyo does to support him and make his life easier. In this way, the text implies that African men must begin to see and appreciate their

women if they are to overcome their “disabled” masculinities and to take their rightful places as national liberators.

Moreover, that The Man finds “his place” without any difficulty “beside his wife” is compelling because it advances a heteronormative paradigm for the ideal Pan-African marriage by suggesting that a *Man*’s place is beside a woman – but only a woman who makes it easy for the *Man* to be beside. Inadvertently, then, in this description of all The Man notices Oyo has done for him, the text works to reinforce normative, hegemonic notions of what it means to be a “good” wife, and a “good” woman, and what sort of women deserve to be seen and appreciated, while again suggesting a metaphorical relationship between women and the nation.

Oyo’s “goodness” is again underscored the next morning when The Man goes to the kitchen to make himself Ovaltine and observes that “his wife had not told the entire truth to the intruding woman beggar the night before. There was some sugar left, though not so much that it could be given away. *She was right*” (102 emphasis mine). Again, we see The Man considering his wife’s motives, and validating her decisions. Rather than judging her, as he did before recognizing his truth, The Man appreciates his wife’s decision, particularly as it benefits him directly. Presenting The Man as appreciative of Oyo’s actions, the text again suggests that one requirement for overcoming a “disabled” and impotent African masculinity is the recognition and acceptance of 1) The goodness of the African woman (and the African nation), and 2) the responsibility of the African *Man* to the African woman (and the African nation).

As an illustration, when The Man attempts to initiate intercourse with the sleeping Oyo, he sees the scar on her belly from their last child being “dragged out of [her] womb,” and is once again made aware of his failures (98). The text explains, “The sight of the scar never ceased to

provoke an involuntary shudder in the mind, running down the spine, and stopping only at its base” (98). Though several scholars have argued that this scene is indicative of The Man’s antipathy towards his family which is fueled by Oyo’s nagging and her obsession with the gleam, and while at least one scholar has read this scene as evidence of The Man’s homoerotic desires and “outright rejection of traditional family structure” (Retief 66), I posit that a closer reading of the narratives immediately following this event clarify The Man’s true feelings.

As a matter of fact, in another scene that can be read as a metaphor for the nation, the text explains that The Man remembers “the color of flesh newly exposed, and the *tortured* face of a woman *alone*, then Oyo’s *forgiving* eyes in the hospital afterward, when he had gone to visit her. There was *love* in her” (98 emphasis mine). What The Man focuses on after seeing Oyo’s scar is not disgust, but despair. His focus on his wife’s body, the newly exposed flesh of her belly, recalls for him the violence of her surgery, while his focus on her tortured face reminds him not only of the pain she experienced giving birth to their child, but the pain that she carries in her body because of his failure to protect her. Even more telling is The Man’s recollection of Oyo’s eyes, her forgiving eyes, which suggest that she doesn’t resent The Man, but loves him.

Indeed, Oyo is a “good” woman. Sure, she is obsessed with acquiring the gleam, but when it comes to fulfilling all of dominant society’s notions of a wife’s responsibilities, Oyo is good. And this “goodness” serves to emphasize The Man’s failures. Consider, for example, the half-dream wherein “the man sees himself as he is... The half dream is not new, and again [he] is overwhelmed by his own inadequacy” (98-99). The involuntary shudder The Man experiences after seeing and touching his wife’s scar, then, is not a shudder of disgust at her body, but rather a shudder of despair at his own inadequacy and inability to protect her. The message is clear: if African men want to become “real” *Men* then they must begin to see and appreciate the “good”

women in their lives, while also acknowledging their damaging impotency, and seeking to rectify the pain that impotency has caused.

As a final example, Armah positions The Man as different from other African men and, therefore, as an example to other African men. He accomplishes this not by focusing on The Man's body, as he does with the other male characters, but by relying on a metaphor of sight. In fact, when read carefully, each of the other male characters, are depicted as having been in some way afflicted by some sort of visual impairment. Koomson, for instance, is presented as myopic. He can only see one thing: himself. When the bread seller tells him that she's seen him before, Koomson looks around in the dark and smiles beatifically as if it's only logical that he should be seen. And, when The Man walks up to him, Koomson tells him, "I almost didn't see you" (34). Moreover, Koomson is described as not seeing his own steward standing near him in his house (147), and, once Nkrumah has been overthrown in the coup, Koomson is described as focused solely on preserving his own life (161-163). Clearly then, to emphasize Koomson's selfishness, Armah relies problematically on a metaphor of visual impairment.

Kofi Billy, too, appears to be myopic, or nearsighted, for he is unable to see anything but that which is right in front of him. He is thus unable to imagine for himself alternative forms of being in the world after his "accident." In fact, references to Kofi Billy's staring at the place where his leg used to be appear at least five times in the ten pages Armah devotes to his story. And, when Kofi Billy tells Maanan, after smoking wee, that he can see a "long, long way," he immediately undermines his assertion by saying, "...I would like to be able to... see where we are going... It is not possible... to see where we are going. I am just going" (74), and looks down, again, at the sand beneath his wood and metal leg. Thus, we can see, in Kofi Billy's case, not an "eye" for himself, but for, perhaps, what he used to be or, rather, what his body used to be.

Together with Koomson's and Kofi Billy's myopia, Armah uses a metaphor of sight to situate Teacher as someone who can see, but who refuses to see. The text is clear that Teacher *can* see: He tells The Man, for instance, "just look around you and you will see it even now" (92), and even claims, "I can see things... when you can see the end of things even in their beginnings, there's no more hope" (61). Yet, Teacher embraces a self-imposed blindness, so that he doesn't have to see society's problems, or the outstretched arms of his loved ones (56). Again, then, Armah relies on a metaphor of disability to articulate a characteristic that he deems problematic and damaging to the nation.

Conversely, where Koomson, Kofi Billy, and Teacher are all presented as having been afflicted with some sort of visual impairment, Armah's use of sight metaphors work to present Nkrumah as a sickness that visually impairs others. Rather than a person who sees, Armah presents Nkrumah as an object to be seen, and having been seen, distorts the vision of those watching. Recall that Maanan tells the men "you haven't seen him yet" (84), and The Man explains that when Nkrumah spoke "his words made him look even smaller, even weaker than he had looked at first" (87). By the same token, Nkrumah himself is quoted as saying "...you can see that I have nothing in my hands. A few here know where I live. Not much is there... It is the kindness of a woman [that brought me here]. Before she saw me I did what we all do..." (87). Clearly, then, Armah's emphasis is on how Nkrumah appeared, that is, how others saw him. By emphasizing the appearance of Nkrumah's physical body and then, ultimately, vanishing Nkrumah's body altogether, Armah presents him as a disingenuous, dangerous fraud who afflicts those who want to believe with spurious visions of hope and ultimately painful delusions of a brighter future.

Juxtaposed with these visually “impaired” men, is The Man. Though, as the above discussion has established, The Man was initially “blind” to the truth about himself and his impotent masculinity, because he embraces a strategy of actively living against the gleam, unlike the others, he is not blinded by the allure of the gleam. Rather, the text depicts him as inordinately sensitive to the gleam’s bright lights. The Man is consistently depicted in the novel as being blinded by the bright lights of fancy cars, and when he visits Koomson’s house, he immediately notices that there is “so much light” there (145).

Moreover, because The Man is not “blinded” to the gleam, he is able to see much more clearly all that is happening around him. For example, he sees the overflowing trash receptacles on the streets and the layers and layers of paint on his office building (7). On a lunch break, he goes for a walk to the harbor where he notices the bottom of the dam which had “smooth sandy pebbles [and] clear water... floating over it” (23). Lazarus refers to this scene as a “moment of happiness” for the man, and “an instant’s awareness of the validity of his stance” (170). In another scene, The Man sees “small clouds, very white... against a sky that is a pale, weak blue... [and a sea that] looks green and deep. A seagull, flying low... in the direction of the harbor” (113). He notices, after helping Koomson escape, that “the sea looked lighter, with its greens and blues separate... waves, furling at the edges, came all the way and broke into little pieces each right on top of the last” (181), as well as a “bird with a song that was strangely happy” (183).

The Man also sees the people around him. Not only does he see them, but he acknowledges them as fellow human beings. In this way, The Man’s sight also makes him perceptive. He notes the prostitutes hiding in the shadows, how youthful their voices sound, and when one of them abruptly lowers her fee from five to three after he refuses her, The Man notes,

“so many desperate needs” (36). The Man, then, not only sees the prostitute, but her desperation, and he situates that desperation within the framework of their corrupt society and the people’s needs. Similarly, he notices the fruit/bread sellers and their desperation to sell their wares (37). He contemplates the violence and pain of the returning soldiers (64), and the grave imbalance of power between white men and black men (66-69). He sees that Kofi Billy’s “accident” has broken him, and also that there’s nothing he can do to help him (74). The Man sees the truth about Koomson’s boat scheme, and feels responsible for preventing his family from being duped (93). He sees when Oyo puts on airs in front of the taxi driver, and though it makes him uncomfortable, he knows that she, like others, is merely in the “habit of pretending that [her] dreams had come true” (141). And he sees the steward Koomson doesn’t notice (147). The Man sees in Oyo’s eyes a change (160), as well as gratitude when she finally comes to recognize that his rejection of the gleam has saved them (165), and he sees the changes in both the boatman’s and watchman’s eyes once they realize that Koomson is no longer a minister to whom they have to pay their respects (175). The Man’s “good” vision, then, is predicated on his rejection of the gleam, indicating step one to becoming a “real” African man and being able to see the way forward. As Lazarus argues about the novel’s ending, “Taking his individual stance in the present against the gleam, ‘the man’ elects to live for ‘the beautiful ones’ of the future. That way, and that way alone, lies freedom” (173).

What Lazarus refers to as The Man’s “individual stance... alone” Jean Solomon describes as a position of “total isolation” (31). Yet, I disagree that the end of the novel suggests a completely isolated journey forward. In fact, I believe the text suggests that if, while actively resisting the gleam, The Man utilizes his “good” vision, he will discover others, like him, who choose to actively live against the gleam. Take for instance the driver of the neat, new green bus

carrying the inscription “The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born.” The text tells us that The Man stops to watch the driver’s interaction with the police who are seeking bribes. Interestingly, the bus driver doesn’t position himself, but rather his passengers, as being in a hurry. Thus, one interpretation of his having given the corrupt police officer a bribe (182), is that it is not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of his passengers, recalling to mind Armah’s contention that Africans seeking liberation must seek out ways to be useful to one another.

Moreover, unlike the bus driver at the beginning of the novel who thought The Man had witnessed him reveling in the stench of a cedi note he received, and who became embarrassed, afraid, and ultimately enraged after believing he’d been caught, the driver of the green bus “must have seen [The Man watching] by the roadside, for, as the bus started up the road and out of the town, he smiled and waved to the man” (183). Again, then, the driver of this green bus seems to be different from other characters we’ve met in the novel. Rather than expressing anger at having been caught reveling in corruption, this driver does not seem to feel guilty at all.

We’re told that The Man “watched the bus go all the way up the road and then turn and disappear... [and that he was] unable to shake off the imprint of the painted words” (183). With these words still in his mind, he ponders a bird, and is then “consumed with thoughts of everything he was going back to – Oyo, the eyes of the children after six o’clock, the office and every day, and above all the never-ending knowledge that this aching emptiness would be all the remainder of his *own* life could offer him.” Yet, despite these thoughts filled with a hopelessness for himself, the text is clear: The Man “walked very slowly, going home” (183). Thus, the text suggests not a singular, isolated journey forward, but one wherein a man with “good” vision will, from time to time, see a kindred spirit, affirming his positive vision for the future, reminding him that he is not completely alone, and, motivating him to continue his active living against the

gleam, but within society, among his people, and for the beautiful ones of the future – even if he does it very slowly.

## **Conclusion**

Armah's Pan-African vision for the future of Africa includes a version of African masculinity that is based on and in response to western/colonial discourse on the black body. Thus, like 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> c. discourse that concerned itself with "correcting" the disabled body so that it would better "fit" in the nation, Armah presents a "disabled" African masculinity that must be "corrected" if it is to be useful to the Pan-Africanist project of re-membering Africa. Moreover, this construction of an "ideal" African masculinity results in problematic notions of the African woman, situating her simultaneously as the nation's savior and as in need of saving, as well as presenting her as mother of the nation, producer of the nation, and symbol of the nation

### Chapter Three:

#### “You are Either a Big Man or You are Not: Male Leadership in Nigerian Literature”

“You are either a big man or you are not. If you are, the world is your oyster. If you are not, you are the scum of the earth.” So proclaims Nigerian journalist, Femi Aribisala, in his scathing critique of Nigeria’s “chronic national malaise”: Bigmanism. Aribisala goes on to describe Bigmanism as “a disease whereby members of a highly visible segment of society are paraded as higher breeds beyond the pale of the law. These big-men flout all conventions and they break all the rules. In Nigeria, bigmanism is the key that opens all doors” (Aribisala). The term, “Big Man,” has long been used colloquially and, perhaps, less antagonistically, in many African countries to describe a well-connected man (or woman) of status, money, or power. More recently, however, much in the way Aribisala invokes the label, both African and Western journalists have begun to use the term “Big Man” to emphasize the problems of Africa and African leadership. Indeed, the media relies on a normative discourse that often uses the term “Big Man” as a synonym for tyrant, to describe African leaders who, without impunity, exploit their political power for their own benefit, and who rely on violence and terror to maintain their decades-long “democratic” dictatorships.<sup>15</sup> For example, Gerald Caplan, writing for the *Globe and Mail*, describes African Big Men as leaders who “betray” their own people (n.p.), while Steven Friedman, writing for *BDLive*, states that they are leaders who “...prefer exploiting their societies to serving them” (n.p.). Iyabo Obasanjo, writing for *The Punch*, defines them as

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, “An African Big Man in Trouble,” *Newsweek*, December 14, 1997; “‘Big Man’ Rule Haunts Africa,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 2000; “Ugandans Put ‘Big Man’ politics to vote,” *Washington Post*, February 22, 2006; “A Huge ‘no’ to Africa’s big-man Politics,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 23, 2006; “Africa’s Top 10 ‘Big Men’,” *BBC News*, June 12, 2009; “Qadhafi is latest African ‘Big Man’ to Fall,” *US News & World Report*, October 2, 2001; “Curing Africa’s ‘big-man’ syndrome,” *The Punch*, February 19, 2014; “Africa’s Big Men Betray it Still,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 11, 2014, etc.

“dictators with overwhelming power,” and describes her own father, Nigeria’s former president and Big Man, Olusegun Obasanjo, as having a “narcissistic megalomaniac personality,” and as being “the prototypical ‘Mr. Know it all’” who “surround[s] [him]self with idiots who will agree with [him] on anything and [who] need [him] for financial gain and [who he] needs... for [his] insatiable ego”(n.p.).

While these depictions of the African Big Man proceed from genuine concerns about corruption and the presence of “gangster politics” in some African countries, the definition remains quite narrow and much too simplistic to be accepted unreservedly. Using the Big Man concept so loosely is, as Keith Somerville argues on Africanarguments.org, more indicative of biased journalism regarding Africa and African conflict, than it is about the reality of the African Big Man: “...many African leaders could be labeled Big Men without this adding to our understanding of the dynamics of the contexts in which they operate, it would become just another simplistic explanation for all manner of conflicts, as tribalism and ethnicity are so often in media coverage of Africa.” Emphasis, then, on African Big Men as merely corrupt and violent political leaders is not particularly useful to understanding how Big Men are able to make the world their oyster, as Aribisala contends – that is, such discussions do not explain how one becomes a Big Man, nor do they explore the means by which Big Man power exists, or what Big Men must do to maintain their power and their position.

This chapter intervenes in current Big Man discourse by offering a critical examination of the Big Man in African literature. In an effort to narrow the scope, I will focus specifically on the Nigerian novel and what depictions of the African Big Man figure might contribute to our understanding of Nigeria as a nation. By focusing on how the Big Man operates and the dynamics that make that process possible, as well as how Big Man power is achieved,

maintained, affirmed, and contested, this chapter contributes a more complex understanding, and more productive analysis of what the Big Man might mean to the nation, and, perhaps, what that might tell us about Nigeria's "chronic national malaise." For the African Big Man must be understood as a phenomena much more complex than the mere execution of violence, terror, corruption, and greed. Big Men, though powerful, are after all, still just men operating within larger structures of power.

### **The Big Man**

The term "Big Man" was first used in scholarship in 1963 by anthropologist Marshal D. Sahlins to describe a type within the Melanesian social and political hierarchy. Sahlins's anthropological model of Melanesian Big Man describes this individual as a highly influential member of society who maintains his personal power and (often informal) authority by developing and maintaining a following, and by assisting and providing for that following. Sahlins's model has been instrumental to scholars in a number of disciplines as they examine social, political, and economic factors in various countries. This trend, however, has been somewhat problematic in that much of this scholarship used Sahlins's model to describe various peoples outside of Melanesia, often with little regard for the ways in which these people's cultural and political organization differs greatly from that in Melanesia. Perhaps, spurred on by cultural anthropologist Henri Claessen's dubious declaration that "The big man essentially is found everywhere on earth" (102), scholars have felt comfortable using the concept rather loosely.

Albert Trouwborst attempted to address this concern in 1986 when he argued that the term "Big-Man" should be used by scholars as a descriptor for those outside of Melanesia only

when characterizing an individual who is “a self-made man, exerting personal power... [and whose] authority and power [are] based on his wealth and position in the exchange system” (50), a locally organized economic system wherein members exchange goods and services among themselves. Trouwborst clarifies further that the “minimum condition for someone to be called a ‘Big-Man’ is that he is a man who derives his position as a leader from his personal efforts in the exchange system” (52). While Trouwborst notes that he noticed similarities between the Melanesian Big Man and some East African forms of clientship, suggesting that the model might be useful in the African context, it was J.F. Médard who first argued that Sahlin’s model of the Melanesian Big Man was compatible to analyses of the behavior of African political elites. However, several years before Trouwborst’s work, and nearly a decade before Médard’s work, Karin Barber published a work on Yoruba religious thought wherein she paralleled the self-made, titled, Yoruba man with the Big Man of New Guinea. Other scholars, those who view the Big Man primarily as a problematic postcolonial and capitalist creation, point even further back to Franz Fanon’s *The Wretched of Earth* as having forecasted the existence of a Big Man type in his discussion of the danger of the African bourgeoisie to the creation of new African nations.<sup>16</sup>

Whatever its origin in the African context, the Big Man has garnered attention from a number of scholars. Despite this critical attention, however, the concept of the African Big Man has, as both Jean-Pascal Daloz and Goran Hyden have argued, remained troublingly undertheorized. Like media discourse on the Big Man, scholarship has, on the one hand, often tended to adopt a normative discourse that villainizes Big Men, depicting them as responsible for all of the problems present in their nations<sup>17</sup> and, on the other hand, presenting the Big Man as

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<sup>16</sup> See Susanna Iacona Salafia, 2014, Josiah Baker, 2007, Alec Russell, 2000, Nana Kusi Appea Busia, 1996,

<sup>17</sup> See work by Josiah Baker, The Overseas Development Institute, Nana Kusi Appea Busia, Susanna Iacona Salafia

existing on the fringes of the political, social, national, and/or economic conditions with which the research is focused, problematically evading any discussion of the function of Big Men or the dynamics of the contexts in which they operate.

According to Lisa Lindsay, “since at least the early nineteenth century,” Yoruba men who aspired to be Big Men “competed with each other for followers, wealth, and reputation. These “aspiring ‘big men’ struggled to establish themselves at the center of a circle of people, whose labor was invested in the expansion of their farms or trading enterprises” (141). Similarly, John Iliffe found that the Big Man, and the large, complex household or compound of which he was the head, and which was occupied by “his wives, married and unmarried sons, younger brothers, poor relations, dependents, and swarming children” was a key character in precolonial equatorial Africa and parts of West Africa (97). Kathryn Holland’s work on pre-and early colonial Rhodesia argues that the Big Man archetype “offered an established and highly desirable mode of masculinity, and that a Big Man’s success at this time depended not merely on his material wealth, but on the “appearance and loyalty of familial and other followers” (122). Similarly, Emmanuel Akyeampong’s work on gender and urbanization in early colonial Ghana posits that “the image of the aristocratic ‘big man’ has had an alluring appeal in the history of southern Ghana,” explaining that this Big Man’s lifestyle was “characterized by generosity, the use of imported drinks, rich cloths, gold ornaments, and a large number of wives, children and dependents” (223).

As I established in the introduction, colonialism, as well as the unavoidable changes to traditional political and social spheres that accompanied it, and the introduction of western commerce and western education created huge changes in African gender relations. These changes also affected the Big Man. Akyeampong notes that though colonialism “expanded the

opportunities of accumulation and gave ordinary people access to ‘big man’ status,” it also, in many ways, made the cultural goal of becoming a ‘big man’ more elusive (223). Andrea Cornwall notes this shift as well, stating that the changes wrought by colonialism, “the opening up of opportunities for men beyond ‘traditional’ forms of wealth and authority,” created “different routes to ‘bigness,’ which in turn depend[ed] on and g[a]ve rise to changing ideals of masculinity” (232).

Though there are important differences between the precolonial, new-postcolonial and present-day Big Man, several characteristics remain relevant to each “type”. First, the African Big Man relies almost entirely on his ability to become “rich in people” to garner and maintain his position, power, and authority.<sup>18</sup> He accomplishes this by developing strong personal relationships, gaining a positive reputation, exhibiting great generosity, offering stability and protection, as well as opportunities, and engaging in a relationship of reciprocity with his followers.

Wealth is necessary to becoming and remaining a Big Man, but it is not the primary goal of most Big Men. Big Men know that their greatest wealth comes in the form of loyal followers. Second, Big Men operate as both formal and informal political and economic actors via networks, and they provide a crucial link between society and the political system, sometimes operating within the State or traditional forms of government, but sometimes operating against it.<sup>19</sup> Third, Big men represent a dominant form of African masculinity that other men often aspire to.<sup>20</sup> There are several routes to becoming a Big Man. This becomes particularly true after the

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<sup>18</sup> See work by Meischer and Lindsay (2003), Daloz (2003), Bayart (2013), Jackson and Rosberg (1982), Akyeampong (2000), Iliffe (1995), Holland (2005), Lindsay (2003), Barber (1981)

<sup>19</sup> See work by Bayart (2013), Meischer (2007), Hyden (2006), Utas (2012)

<sup>20</sup> See work by Meischer and Lindsay (2003), Holland (2005), Lindsay (2003)

imposition of colonialism greatly transformed African social, political and cultural spheres, causing a shift in the ways Africans conceived of and perceived masculinity. In all these ways, it is clear then that being a Big Man is not a fixed category, but, rather, a fragile social position that is under constant threat.<sup>21</sup>

By identifying the themes found in several studies of the African Big Man, as well as the work of Daloz and Mats Utas, who have both produced works that theorize the Big Man, I have developed a working definition and framework that I believe will be useful for understanding in greater detail just how the Big Man, a figure dating back to precolonial Africa, remains relevant and continues to function in the post-independence African nation-state. While I draw on several scholars' discussions of the Big Man, it is important to note that the term has been present in African discourse, in formal and in informal discourses, for a very long time. With this in mind, and for the sake of clarity and specificity, when I use the term "Big Man" in this chapter, I am referring to an individual whose wealth, charismatic personality, and relationships with others grant him/her a great deal of social – and often, though not always, political – power. The position of the postcolonial Big Man is created via the complex relationship between traditional values, Western ideals, the continued exploitation of the nation by former colonial powers, and the insecurity of the new nation state. Finally, when I refer to the Big Man, I am always referring to a position that is in constant flux and under constant threat of usurpation.

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<sup>21</sup> See work by Daloz (2003), Utas (2012)

In the following pages, I use this framework to examine the Big Man characters Okonkwo from Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959), Chief Nanga from Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1967), and Cash Daddy from Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani's *I Do Not Come to You by Chance* (2009). Each of these novels was written and published during significant historical moments and are rooted in and shaped by the political climates of their times. *Things Fall Apart*, written during the process of decolonization and on the precipice of independence, reflects a pre-colonial Igbo clan and uses the figure of the precolonial Big Man to navigate the space between "the hegemonic culture of the colonizer and the repressed traditions of the colonized" (Gikandi 102), in an effort to imagine the best possible version of the new nation. *A Man of the People*, written during the tumultuous time of Independence, reflects the incoherence, confusion and anxiety of the period, and uses the new-postcolonial Independence-leader Big Man to explore "the process by which the dream of national liberation was negated" (Gikandi 124). *I Do Not Come to You by Chance*, written and published nearly fifty years after Nigerian independence, reflects our globalized present-day world, Nigeria's problems of corruption and class division, and uses the contemporary African Big Man as an example of what has the potential to be good for the nation. I argue that in each of these novels, the Big Men reflect not only the social and political realities of their time, but that their roles, their power, and how it is acquired and maintained, provide a specific commentary on the nation. Likewise, I contend that the authors of these novels use the Big Man figure to challenge and reconfigure both Nigerian and Western discourses on the African nation and gender relations in new and meaningful ways.

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### **Okonkwo, the precolonial Big Man**

“Perhaps down in his heart Okonkwo was not a cruel man. But his whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness. It was deeper and more intimate than the fear of evil and capricious gods and of magic, the fear of the forest, and of the forces of nature, malevolent, red in tooth and claw. Okonkwo’s fear was greater than these. It was not external but lay deep within himself. It was the fear of *himself*...”

“A Big Man is only ‘Big’ if other people think so.”

A great many scholars have noted the extraordinary significance of Chinua Achebe’s acclaimed *Things Fall Apart* (1959). As Ernest Emenyoh has noted, the novel, “in over 55 languages and more than 8 million copies in sales, is the most widely read African novel, inside and outside the African continent” (xvii). Moreover, many critics situate its significance in the fact that the novel serves as an example of colonial discourse analysis, that is, what Simon Gikandi terms a “counterpoint to the colonial library” (7), and what Kwado Osei-Nyame describes as “an early African nationalist tradition that repudiates imperialist and colonist ideology” (148). Achebe’s efforts in *Things Fall Apart* to contest colonial discourse must be understood, then, not only as an assertion of his own ideology about his responsibility as a writer to recover the nation’s history and cultures, but of a particular presentation of a specific nationalist ideology.

Indeed, many scholars have noted that *Things Fall Apart* ought to be read as a nationalist text, and Achebe himself has said that he wrote *Things Fall Apart* “...as part of the growth of Nigerian nationalism” (O’Reilly 61). Citing a 1962 interview with Lewis Nkosi where Achebe insisted that his narratives were meant to influence ‘the next generation,’ Francis Ngaboh-Smart, argues that “it is the assumption that writing can somehow mold worlds or that ‘questions of national identity are closely related to narrative strategy’, that situates Achebe’s writing at the center of race, politics, and the discourse on nationhood” (4). Building on this notion of *Things Fall Apart* as a nationalist text, other scholars have argued more specifically that the nationalism

found in the novel is masculine in nature.<sup>22</sup> Osei-Nyame, for example, has stated that *Things Fall Apart* “may be read in the first instance as the narration of an epic African masculine nationalist tradition [because] Achebe’s text links and identifies power and authority with masculinity” (150).

This reading of the novel is, no doubt, somewhat indebted to its protagonist, Okonkwo, the hypermasculine, “great” man of Umuofia. Yet Okonkwo is not merely a great man, he is also a Big Man. In 1996, Heinemann published an expanded edition of *Things Fall Apart*, which included, among other reference materials, a “List of Characters.” In this list, Achebe identifies Nwakibi, the man who helped Okonkwo get started by loaning him yams for his farm, as a Big Man. Okonkwo, he identifies as a “strong, proud man.” Writing in 1959, before Nigeria’s independence, it is likely that Achebe’s model for the Big Man is based on the precolonial and colonial Big Men discussed earlier, which emphasized land ownership, providing for people on large compounds, and having a great many resources at one’s disposal. Since Okonkwo had to make his riches on his own, he probably hadn’t yet reached the level of the precolonial Big Man Achebe had in mind. Despite this fact, a very strong case can still be made for Okonkwo’s Big Man status. Indeed, he may very well be the most memorable literary depiction of a pre-colonial African Big Man by an African writer to date, and thus, provides an important place from which to begin our discussion of the Big Man archetype in Nigerian literature.

That Okonkwo is a Big Man is clear from the opening of the novel: “Okonkwo [is] well known throughout the nine villages and beyond. His fame rest[s] on solid personal achievements” (3). Having invented himself as his village’s hero, by overthrowing the

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<sup>22</sup> See Osei-Nyame, Kwadwo. “Chinua Achebe Writing Culture: Representations of Gender and Tradition in ‘Things Fall Apart,’” 1999; Ide Coreley, “Conjuncture, Hypermasculinity and Disavowel in *Things Fall Apart*,” 2009.

undefeated Amalinze the Cat in a wrestling match, Okonkwo's "fame ha[s] grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan" (3). Not only has he achieved fame through wrestling, but in all other aspects of his life. This is significant because the Umuofian people revere achievement (8), and, as the novel makes clear, Okonkwo has achieved a great deal in the twenty years since overthrowing Amalinze the Cat. He has become a "wealthy farmer" with "two barns full of yams," has married his third wife, has a number of children, and is seen as a powerful and respected figure in his clan (8). Thus we're told, despite his young age, Okonkwo is "already one of the greatest men of his time" (8).

Okonkwo's reputation as one of the greatest men of his time, as well as his position as a Big Man in the clan are dependent on his ability to acquire supporters. This support, in large part, is predicated on the respect the people of Umuofia have for him. In their research on the construction of masculinity in Sub-Saharan Africa, Gary Barker and Christine Ricardo found that Big Men were individuals who, among other things, "commanded respect" (164). Okonkwo is considered "one of the lords of the clan" (26), primarily because his many accomplishments were not a result of luck, but because of his own hard work, thus earning him his clan's veneration:

Anyone who knew [Okonkwo's] grim struggle against poverty and misfortune could not say he had been lucky. If ever a man deserved success, that man was Okonkwo. ...the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed. And not only his *chi* but his clan, too, because it judged a man by the work of his hands (27).

It is this respect for Okonkwo that prompts Umuofia, and the nine surrounding villages, to choose him to go as an emissary of war to Mbaino, a neighboring village (27), and again when they appoint him ward of Ikemefuna, the boy who was sent by Mbaino as a peace offering to Umuofia. Similarly, it is the clan's respect for Okonkwo that positions him at the top of the social – and political – hierarchy, allowing him to become one of the clan's leaders, and to serve as one of the “nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan” (89). Though Okonkwo's personal achievements earn him the respect of the clan, it is Okonkwo's preservation of that respect that solidifies his status.

Beyond his many achievements, and the respect garnered by those achievements, Okonkwo's Big Man status is also accomplished in his physical body and his expression of masculinity. He is a big man, literally. In addition to suggesting his athletic prowess, the text describes him as muscular, “tall and huge” (3), and as having “a very severe look” (4). Okonkwo is also “very strong,” he rarely feels fatigue, and he easily works “daily on his farms from cock-crow until the chickens went to roost” (13). Without doubt, Okonkwo's body meets the physical expectations of an “ideal” man because it reflects his hard physical labor, and, thus, his virility. In fact, Okonkwo embodies and performs all of the characteristics associated with both masculinity and hypermasculinity. Lisa Lindsay contends that Big Men “gained their hyper-masculine status through wealth, followers, and connections to political power – attributes which in turn supported each other” (142), but Okonkwo's hypermasculinity is not just a product of his achievements and reputation, though he does have wealth and followers, and despite his holding a high position in his clan's political structure. Rather, these attributes support and are supported by Okonkwo's other expressions of hypermasculinity. Donald L. Mosher and Mark Sirkin, authors of the earliest studies on hypermasculinity or “macho personality,” defined

hypermasculinity as consisting of three variables: callous attitudes and sexual and physical aggression towards women, the belief that violence is manly, and the experience of danger as exciting. While Mosher and Sirkin do not define hypermasculinity in culturally specific terms, the demographics of their research subjects situate their study firmly within the context of 19-20-year-old, white, male, middle-class, Catholic college students in Connecticut. Yet, Achebe's character Okonkwo demonstrates each of these characteristics in excess throughout the novel.

That Okonkwo thinks very little of women and femininity is clearly communicated. In fact, he is obsessed with embracing everything considered masculine and eschewing anything deemed feminine. Okonkwo's obsession with maleness goes hand-in-hand with "his corresponding fear of, and suppression of femaleness" (Jeyifo 850). He hates weakness, and idleness, and, for this reason, he is ashamed of his father, Unoka, a "lazy and improvident" coward who people "laughed at" because he was such a failure, having never acquired a single title, and earning himself the name *agbala* (4-5). The text tells us that "...agbala was not only another name for woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title" (13). Furthermore, Okonkwo thinks so little of womanhood that he uses it as a means to insult other men. When, Osugo, a fellow clansman contradicts him at a meeting held to discuss an upcoming feast, we're told that "Without looking at the man Okonkwo had said: 'This meeting is for men.' The man who contradicted him had no titles. That is why he had called him a woman. Okonkwo knew how to kill a man's spirit" (26). Okonkwo demonstrates his dominant masculinity thereby reminding Osugo that he is a man with no title and therefore not a "real" man at all. Okonkwo's expression and obsession with masculinity is, as Osei-Nyame describes it, a "defensive resource;" it is the means by which he is able to avoid becoming like his father. Furthermore, as Osei-Nyame contends, "his adherence to a masculine philosophy... order[s] his world" (151),

and Okonkwo's commitment to imposing that ordering on the people around him is obvious in his expression of hypermasculinity.

This is evident not only in his treatment of his wives, but in the very way he embraces violence as a symbol of his manhood. The novel is clear that Okonkwo is physically violent with his wives, ruling his household with "a heavy hand" (13), – on more than one occasion Okonkwo beats his wives, and at one point, attempts to shoot one of them – yet his violence extends beyond the private sphere. We're told that he "seemed to walk on springs, as if he was going to pounce on somebody. And he did pounce on people quite often," that he used his fists, when he couldn't "get his words out quickly enough" (4), that he is a ferocious warrior who doesn't avoid dangerous situations, having "shown incredible prowess in two inter-tribal wars" from which he's brought home 5 human skulls (8), that "unlike his father he could stand the look of blood" (10), and that he is willing go against his clan's values by killing a child who had become like a son to him, merely because "he was afraid of being thought weak" (61). Furthermore, the text describes Okonkwo as never showing any sign of weakness, or any emotion other than anger (28), as hard-working (13); and as a "man of action, a man of war" (10). Thus, while Okonkwo's achievements are celebrated in Umuofia, earning him wealth, followers, and a high-ranking position within the clan, and warranting claim to "Big Man" status, it is his expression of hypermasculine traits that enable him to maintain this position.

Osei-Nyame argues that Umuofia's authoritative discourse links its traditions with Okonkwo's feats thereby presenting a nation that is masculine, and that "consciously omits other representative values and ideals" while sanctioning, if not approving, Okonkwo's problematic hypermasculinist ideals (151). While this seems evident, we cannot overlook the ways in which Achebe uses Okonkwo's Big Man status to disavow the masculine "nationalism" he seems to

invoke. As Gikandi posits, the novel's narrator "seems to promote one perspective or worldview but in the process also calls our attention to the negative side of this point of view" (45). While, on the surface it seems that Achebe is promoting a masculine African nationalist tradition, he both calls our attention to the problems of such a tradition and subverts that tradition. Achebe accomplishes this by demonstrating the ways in which the values and traditions of Umuofia often come into conflict with Okonkwo's actions, thereby threatening Okonkwo's Big Man status and, ultimately, demonstrating his eventual unsuitableness for the clan. By demonstrating the ways in which Okonkwo consciously and unconsciously breaks Umuofian customs and by establishing him as unsuited both for progress and the nation, Achebe negates the authoritative hypermasculine nationalism Okonkwo's Big Man status and the novel seem to support, and advocates, rather, for a new nation that reflects Igbo values, taking all voices into consideration, welcoming critique, accepting the good from both traditional society and the colonizer's culture and rejecting the bad, and transforming itself to meet the needs of its people.

An early example of Achebe's subversion occurs when Okonkwo beats one of his wives during the Week of Peace, thereby committing a "great evil," and placing the clan in potential danger: "The evil you have done can ruin the *whole* clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall *all* perish" (30, emphasis mine). Beating his wife during the Week of Peace earns Okonkwo the wrath of Ezeani, the priest of the Earth goddess, who commands him to make a great sacrifice to the shrine of Ani. Thus, Okonkwo, feeling inwardly repentant, "did as the priest said" (31). Individuality in Umuofia, "while not repressed or denied, is held in check by communal solidarities" (Wright 77). Consequently, because it is "unheard of to beat somebody during the sacred week" (30), and because Okonkwo

is unwilling to admit his mistake, he also earns the disdain of his neighbors who gossip about the crime he has committed:

And so people said he had no respect for the gods of the clan. His enemies said his good fortune had gone to his head. They called him the little bird *nza* who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his *chi*.... It was the first time for many years that a man had broken the sacred peace. Even the oldest men could only remember one or two other occasions somewhere in the dim past. ... [and the oldest man in the village told some visitors] that the punishment for breaking the Peace of Ani had become very mild in their clan (31).

The authority and power granted Okonkwo via his Big Man status is limited to those actions and decisions that do not place Umuofia's community in danger of retribution from an angry god. Moreover, Okonkwo's Big Man status depends on what his clan members think of him, for a Big Man is only "Big" if "other people think so" (Barber 724), and Okonkwo's actions have caused his clan to question their respect for him.

Similarly, Achebe again uses Umuofian tradition to undercut Okonkwo's Big Man status, and the nationalist narrative it supports when Okonkwo accidentally kills a boy at the funeral of a great warrior. Though his actions are inadvertent, and though he is a respected, high-ranking member of his clan, he has committed a "crime against the earth goddess" by killing a clansman (124). The novel tells us that "Okonkwo's gun had exploded and a piece of iron had pierced the boy's heart. The confusion that followed was without parallel in the tradition of Umuofia. Violent deaths were frequent, but nothing like this had ever happened" (124). Okonkwo's punishment is to flee. His compound is burned to the ground, and he, his wives, and their

children are banished from Umuofia for seven years. Unlike the previously discussed incident, we're told that the punishment he receives this time is not personal: "They had no hatred in their hearts against Okonkwo... they were merely cleansing the land which Okonkwo had polluted with the blood of a clansman" (125).

In the first incident, when Okonkwo commits a great evil against the earth goddess by beating his wife, the consequences of his actions are two-fold. First, it requires that he make a large ritual sacrifice to appease the goddess. This punishment, then, seems to be the official consequence of breaking a law and putting the clan in danger of retribution from the earth goddess. Once Okonkwo makes his sacrifice, which, by no means bankrupts him, but which is certainly a large financial loss, he has, in the "legal" sense, fulfilled his duty; he has "done his time." Though his crime made him an enemy of the clan because it put the clan in danger, once Okonkwo corrects his crime through sacrifice, he is, again in the "legal" sense, free to rejoin his community.

Interestingly, Okonkwo's second, and perhaps more poignant, punishment can best be described as an unintended social consequence. That is, though Okonkwo readily pays for his crime as decreed by tradition, the unintended social consequence is that his clan loses respect for him. While his wealth enables him to easily buy his way out from under the earth goddess's wrath, it cannot, in this second instance, influence what his clan thinks of him. As Mats Utas points out, "being a Big Man is not a fixed label but rather a term that highlights a position within social relations" (9). This position is primarily maintained via relationships and reputation. Though Okonkwo can maintain his reputation as a Big Man because his wealth enables him to "pay" for his crime, because he breaks the peace and refuses to acknowledge his mistake, he causes his clan to question his respect for the gods and to assume that he has

forgotten himself. This sullies his reputation and results in threatening his position within the clan's social relations. In short, Okonkwo's actions endanger his status as a Big Man because they cause him to lose supporters.

Significantly, when Okonkwo inadvertently kills a clansman, we again see an official, or "legal," consequence, and a social consequence. The official consequence, as I mentioned, is banishment. One of the resulting, and quite probably intended, consequences of banishment is the loss of social standing:

Seven years was a long time to be away from one's clan. A man's place was not always there waiting for him. As soon as he left, someone else rose and filled it. The clan was like a lizard; if it lost its tail it soon grew another. Okonkwo knew these things. He knew that he had lost his place among the nine masked spirits who administered justice in the clan. He had lost the chance to lead his warlike clan against the new religion.... He had lost the years in which he might have taken the highest titles in the clan (171).

Though his crime was an accident, the "official" consequences of it are quite severe. Yet the unintended consequences may be even more so. Not only does Okonkwo not comprehend the meaning or value his clan places on the colonizers or their presence in the village, as a naturally severe, inflexible, socially-stunted "man-of-action" even before his banishment, Okonkwo does not seem to be equipped to critically examine Umuofia's new reality or the role he might now play in it. The unintended social consequences of Okonkwo's banishment are that, because of the intrusion of a new colonial presence with which Okonkwo has had no experience, upon his return, he is completely out of touch with the realities of his clan. Though Okonkwo still has the reputation of being a hard worker and great achiever, when he returns to Umuofia, he is at a

distinct disadvantage. Thus, Okonkwo, the Big Man, serves as the impediment to his own success in the new Umuofia. I will return to this point in the conclusion, but first it is necessary to complete our discussion of how Achebe undercuts the masculine nationalist tradition the novel seems to invoke.

A final example of how Achebe uses Umuofian tradition to challenge Okonkwo's Big Man status and the masculine nationalist tradition the novel seems to promote occurs when Okonkwo is harshly reprimanded by Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, when he pleads with her not to take his daughter, Ezinma. In response to Okonkwo's pleas, the priestess screams, "Beware, Okonkwo! ...Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!" (101). Here we witness Okonkwo's tough, hypermasculine veneer crack as we watch him plead for a small girl child, an individual who, had she not been his own flesh and blood, would likely, given Okonkwo's extreme sexism, be inconsequential to him (there are several places in the text where Okonkwo wishes his daughter Ezinma had been born a boy). Second, when Chielo rebukes Okonkwo, it is because he has again "forgotten himself" and disregarded his place and role in the community. Though a Big Man, with great authority, Okonkwo must still respect Chielo's role as the voice of Agbala. In this role, no one but Agbala himself can challenge her authority. Achebe, then, again highlights the limitations of Okonkwo's Big Man power in the face of greater clan authority.

Pursuing this incident further, it becomes apparent that Okonkwo's Big Man status is also complicated when Okonkwo, out of fear and concern for Ezinma and his wife, Ekwefi, follows Chielo to Agbala's shrine. We're told that Okonkwo "felt very anxious but did not show it" and, after "he had allowed what he regarded as a reasonable and *manly* interval to pass" he went, machete in hand, to the shrine (112, emphasis mine). As a Big Man of status and authority, as a

great man of Umuofia, this moment in the text is crucial to our understanding of Okonkwo and the masculine nationalist tradition Achebe invokes and then subverts. For Okonkwo doesn't simply go to the shrine after a "manly interval." He goes to the shrine, then, second guessing himself about Chielo's route, he returns to the village. After waiting in the village for some time, he returns to the shrine. He makes this back and forth trip four times(!) before he finds Ekwefi, and in that time, he becomes "gravely worried" (112). Okonkwo's worried trips between the village and the shrine situate him less like a great warrior, and more like a concerned father, a role Okonkwo has hitherto seemed to reject.

When Okonkwo pleads with Chielo, and again when he not only follows her, but second guesses himself, making multiple trips back and forth to the shrine like a hand-wringing, worried, "old woman," we begin to see that Okonkwo is a multi-dimensional character – notwithstanding his own efforts to appear one-dimensional. Despite hiding his anxiety, the very fact that Okonkwo is anxious, so much so that he does what he himself would deem unmanly, adds a complexity to his character that was hitherto obscured from the reader. We must consider that Achebe is attempting to highlight the complex and multidimensional nature of the nation. If even the most rigid Big Man in Umuofia demonstrates anxiety about his clan's traditions, how much more so the "small man," woman, or child?

Osei-Nyame argues that, perhaps, despite the assertion of a "manly interval," Okonkwo waits before following Ekwefi and Chielo because he may have been "less inclined to [be] brave," given the substantial danger of entering the spirit laden forest at night (158), and contends that Okonkwo's emasculation during the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter can be read as prefiguring for Okonkwo "a loss of authority and a deeper disillusionment about his position within the clan that he is later on to experience" (159). According to Osei-Nyame, this incident is

essential to understanding how Achebe challenges the Igbo masculine nationalist tradition presented in the novel because it offers an alternative Igbo nationalist tradition of female resistance (161). I appreciate and find validity in Osei-Nyame's assertion that Achebe employs an alternative Igbo nationalist tradition of female resistance through the narrative of the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter, but I disagree that this incident prefigures Okonkwo's forthcoming demotion in the social strata. In fact, Okonkwo's fate, his loss of Big Man status, power, and authority, is foreshadowed much earlier in the novel when we're told that his "whole life was dominated by fear, the fear of failure and of weakness" (13). For Okonkwo, this fear goes hand-in-hand with his masculinity; to be a man means to be absolutely inflexible, to hate anything that can be interpreted as feminine or as having to do with femininity, and to exercise power and exert dominance over all those who exhibit characteristics he deems unmanly.

Recall, for instance, Okonkwo calling his fellow clansman, Osugo, a woman. While it is implied that such an insult is acceptable within the Umuofian tradition (you'll recall that Unoka is called *agbala*, and we're told that the men of Umuofia who participated in the journey to kill Ikemefuna laughed "about some of the *effeminate* men who had refused to come with them" [58 emphasis mine]), upon hearing this exchange, we're told that one old man who "bore no ill will towards Okonkwo" commented that "...one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast" (26). Though the people in Okonkwo's clan respect him for his many achievements, they also feel somewhat uncomfortable with him: "...most people were [struck] by Okonkwo's brusqueness in dealing with less successful men" (26). This discomfort manifests in concrete consequences for Okonkwo. In this case, "everybody at the kindred meeting took sides with Osugo," and Okonkwo was made to apologize (26). So, while Umuofia seems to tolerate the assumption that women are inferior to men, and while it often seems to support Okonkwo's

misogyny, this is not always the case, especially when Okonkwo's behaviors are deemed too extreme. As Derek Wright points out, "Okonkwo's recklessness and extremism lead him to transgress the traditions he is trying to embody, to distort the values he seeks to defend, and to neglect or ignore other traditions which his village holds equally dear" (78). Okonkwo is consumed with notions of masculinity that are driven by fear, rather than Umuofian values. As such, it is only a matter of time before he clashes with Umuofia in such a way that atonement is impossible. Thus, the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter, though crucial, is not a singular prefiguring of Okonkwo's loss of authority, power, and clan status as Osei-Nyame contends, but, rather, one example, out of many, that situate Okonkwo's masculinity, and his Big Man status, outside of and in conflict with Umuofian values.

Returning then, to the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter we are also reminded of the limitations of Okonkwo's authority. Even as a senior man of high status, Okonkwo has no authority over Chielo. He cannot prevent her from taking his daughter, he cannot stop Agbala if the god decides to take her and train her as a future priestess, and he cannot even stop his wife from going after Chielo. In fact, when he asks Ekwefi where she is going, Ekwefi boldly replies, "I am following Chielo," and leaves (103). Okonkwo, the great man who rules his household with a heavy hand, the man whose fiery temper caused his wives to live "in perpetual fear" (13), does nothing about Ekwefi's brazen response, or the fact that she leaves without waiting for his consent. In fact, in what can only be read as an acknowledgement of defeat, we're told that Okonkwo simply "cleared his throat, and brought out his snuff-bottle from the goatskin bag by his side" (103).

Clearly then, the novel presents these incidences to point to Okonkwo's emasculation. Not only does Okonkwo lack authority, but even the machete he carries, a symbol of masculine

might and the threat of violence, is rendered inconsequential. Carole Boyce Davis has noted, in fact, that Okonkwo's machete, "the symbol of his male aggression, is of no use at all in this context" (247). He does not dare use it on Chielo or Agbala for fear of reprisal not only on himself, but on his whole clan, and he does not use it on Ekwefi when she boldly defies his authority. This point is particularly interesting because we know that nothing has prevented Okonkwo from being violent with his wives in the past. Yet we also know that because Okonkwo has continuously made choices that put him in direct conflict with Umuofian values, he has begun to lose his status and authority as a Big Man. Perhaps this is why we see Okonkwo clearing his throat and bringing out his snuff rather than exercising his authority. By undercutting the authoritative masculine tradition the novel seems to support, and proposing an alternative that is based in female resistance, as we see in the Chielo-Ezinma-Ekwefi encounter, Achebe takes to task those problematic assertions of African nationalisms which claim that their commitment to an inflexible, authoritative, power-focused patriarchal, political hierarchy and social structure is merely rooted in long-held gendered African traditions.

Not only does Achebe challenge Okonkwo's Big Man status in terms of female resistance and Umuofian tradition, but he also complicates Okonkwo's clan position as a Big Man by depicting him as unable to adapt and progress with the times. One defining characteristic of a successful Big Man, especially one operating with an Igbo value system, is his ability to adapt and change with the times. Very early in the novel it's implied that Okonkwo may not be fit for progress. We're told that "although [he] was a great man whose prowess was universally acknowledged, he was not a hunter. In fact, he had not killed a rat with his gun" (38). Indeed, when one of his wives makes a joke about "guns that never shot," Okonkwo attempts to shoot her at fairly close range, and misses entirely (39). Additionally, if we read the gun as a symbol

of virility, it can only be understood as Okonkwo's impotence when faced with the prospect of progress. The novel's emphasis on Okonkwo as a man of action, and not of thought (69), and his gun as a symbol of technological advancement (we know that Okonkwo is an exceptional warrior when using his machete), clearly situates him as someone who will not thrive in a world that is quickly transforming.

Finally, Achebe challenges Okonkwo's Big Man position in Okonkwo's willingness to break from his people. Upon his return from his seven-year exile, Okonkwo notes the changes in Umuofia, specifically the presence of colonists who had come, introducing a new religion, a new form of government, and a new form of commerce, and he laments to his friend Obierika, "What is it that has happened to our people? Why have they lost the power to fight?" (175). Okonkwo decides that these changes are a problem, but rather than identifying colonialism as the cause, he believes that it is the fault of the men of Umuofia. We're told that he "mourned for the warlike men of Umuofia, who had so unaccountably become soft like women" (183), that he believed that cowardice was "the greatest obstacle in Umuofia..." (200), and that he looks to what he believes is a past form of ideal masculinity: "Those were the days when men were men" (200), to solve the problem. As Andrew Foley points out, it is "vital to recognize that for Okonkwo the destruction of the clan is personally catastrophic" (44). If Okonkwo's "war-like" clan loses their thirst for blood, that is, if it abandons the masculine characteristic of violence with which Okonkwo identifies so deeply, then it also loses Okonkwo, or, rather, Okonkwo, unable to identify with the new clan, becomes displaced, and loses his place as a respected Big Man in his clan.

Okonkwo seems to recognize this threat, but rather than understanding the changes that are happening to his clan as a result of colonial conquest, he blames them for their weakness, and

decides that if they choose not to go to war against the colonists, he will separate from them and forge his own path alone, stating, “I shall leave them and plan my own revenge” (200). The peril of Okonkwo’s willingness to break away from and go against the wishes of his people, to “leave” them behind, is foretold early on in the novel when his dying father tells him, “You have a manly and a proud heart. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. *It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone*” (25, emphasis mine). And so, when Okonkwo chooses to act, by beheading a messenger from the white man’s court (204), without thinking, and without considering the will of his people, he seals his fate. His goal to incite war has failed and he finds himself alone. As he stands over the dead body, Okonkwo recognizes both his failure and his isolation: he “knew that Umuofia would not go to war. He knew because they had let the other messengers escape. They had broken into tumult instead of action. He discerned fright in that tumult. He heard voices asking: ‘Why did he do it?’” (205). In separating himself from the will and approval of his people, Okonkwo severs his link to his clan and surrenders his status. His suicide following this incident only serves to reinforce this fact. We know that Okonkwo’s pride would never allow him to be anything but a Big Man in a clan characterized, at least in part, by its warrior-like men; we know that his hypermasculine extremism comes into conflict with his clan’s values and results in severe consequences for him, we know that he is too inflexible to adapt to the times, and we know that his willingness to isolate himself away from his people make him unfit for maintaining the revered position of one of Umuofia’s Big Men.

Though I’ve spent several pages establishing how Achebe seems to subvert the masculine nationalist tradition *Things Fall Apart* seems to invoke by undercutting Okonkwo’s Big Man masculinity, I would like to take just a few more to explore what these incidents, and the

narratives surrounding them, might tell us about Achebe's view of the new nation. For within the narration of Okonkwo's Big Man masculinity, Achebe also invokes the viewpoints of other male characters (You'll recall the men's reaction to Okonkwo calling Osugo a woman). These viewpoints are many, but for my purposes, I will focus on Obierika, Okonkwo's best friend. Where Okonkwo staunchly holds firm to what he understands to be Umuofian tradition and values – though I've established how he is often in conflict with these traditions – Obierika challenges these values. Obierika's response to Okonkwo's choice to participate in the murder of Ikemefuna, his questioning of Umuofian laws that seem nonsensical, and his ponderings regarding Okonkwo's banishment present an alternative discourse that clashes with and contradicts Okonkwo's Big Man masculinity and Umuofian tradition within the text.

When Okonkwo taunts Obierika about his refusal to participate in Ikemefuna's murder saying, "I cannot understand why you refused to come with us to kill that boy" (66), and suggests that perhaps Obierika is not a "real" man because he is "afraid of blood" (67), Obierika responds sharply,

You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood; and if anyone tells you that I am, he is telling a lie. And let me tell you one thing, my friend. If I were you I would have stayed home. What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action for which the goddess wipes out whole families... If the Oracle said that my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it (67).

This exchange is significant because not only does Obierika suggest that there are other, valid expressions of masculinity when he says, "You know very well, Okonkwo, that I am not afraid of blood," implying that one can be a great warrior and still recognize when one's involvement

in violence is unnecessary (we know that this is an acceptable form of masculinity within Umuofia because he faces no consequences for refusing to participate), but he also makes a distinction between following tradition and agreeing with it. For Obierika, while it may be necessary to comply with the clan's laws in order to ensure the safety of the clan, doing so does not require one to relinquish the right to critique those laws and to consider alternative, more relevant solutions.

This theme is presented again when Okonkwo and Obierika discuss the clan's laws regarding who can tap palm trees. Obierika comments, "Sometimes I wish I had not taken the *ozo* title... It wounds my heart to see these young men killing palm trees in the name of tapping" (69). When Okonkwo comments that "the law of the land must be obeyed," Obierika rejoins with, "I don't know how we got that law. In many other clans a man of title is not forbidden to climb the palm tree. Here we say he cannot climb the tall tree but he can tap the short ones standing on the ground. It is like Dimaragana, who would not lend his knife for cutting up dogmeat because the dog was taboo to him, but offered to use his teeth" (69).

Obierika's comments here demonstrate his impatience with laws that seem nonsensical, but they also point to the larger issue of retaining tradition simply because it is tradition. For Obierika, not only is the tradition absurd – why shouldn't an *ozo* be able to tap his own trees? Does tapping trees somehow threaten the esteem which his title affords him? – but when he mentions that young men are killing palm trees, perhaps implying that their method is amiss, he also seems to be asserting that stubbornly preserving the tradition for tradition's sake has harmful consequences on the environment. In this way, Achebe seems to be commenting on the role of tradition in the new nation. While the new nation must bring with it many of its traditional

practices and values, it must also leave behind those practices that are no longer relevant, that are harmful, and that do not stand up to the values of the new nation.

Similarly, after fulfilling his duty to the clan by participating in the burning of Okonkwo's homestead, we're told that Obierika, who, unlike Okonkwo, "was a man who thought about things... sat down in his *obi* and mourned his friend's calamity" (125). Obierika laments the fact that Okonkwo should be punished so harshly for a crime he committed by accident: "Why should a man suffer so grievously for an offense he had committed inadvertently?" (125). We're told that Obierika's lamentations offer him no answers, only "greater complexities," such as how he might reconcile his wife's having to throw their newborn babies into the bush simply because the earth decreed they were an offense with the fact that they had committed no crime. Though the text tells us that Obierika concludes that it is best not to provoke the wrath of the earth goddess, the fact that we see him repeatedly asking these sorts of questions indicates that a strict adherence to clan law and tradition, without a critical evaluation of the value of these laws and traditions in the present day, is problematic and damaging to both progress and the construction of a new nation.

With independence on the horizon, then, *Things Fall Apart* presents an African masculine nationalist tradition that is challenged more than it is affirmed. The national discourse that Achebe seems to support is one that challenges precolonial power and gender relations as well as what those relations will look like in the new nation. Osei-Nyame rightly argues that "Achebe's narrative... evaluates the crisis of masculine authority within traditional Igbo culture" (161). But it does more than that. What Achebe illustrates through Okonkwo's Big Man masculinity is that the new nation must take into account, represent, and acknowledge the complexity of multiple perspectives, be flexible enough to withstand change, incorporate both traditional values and

colonial culture mindfully and critically, and reject an exclusive authoritarian nationalism for one that embraces a more inclusive, democratic vision.

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### **Chief Nanga, the new nation's Big Man**

“The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.” - Achebe<sup>23</sup>

Where Achebe writes *Things Fall Apart* as a means by which he might imagine the best possible version of the burgeoning new nation, in *A Man of the People*, a novel that has been described as a “merciless excoriation of the new postcolonial state” (Olaniyan 22), he shifts gears; rather than writing to imagine and create, Achebe is now writing to critique. In a 1969 interview Achebe notes that the role of the African writer changed during the era of independence: “Having fought with the nationalist movements and been on the side of the politicians, I realized after independence that they and I were on different sides, because they were not doing what we had agreed to do. So I had to become a critic. I found myself on the side of the people against their leaders – leaders this time being black people” (Lindfors 30). Thus, where national ideals motivated Achebe’s earlier works like *Things Fall Apart*, his later texts, like *A Man of the People*, were born out of political necessity, and they function “as a form of critique prompted by Achebe’s estrangement from the realities of the nation” (Gikandi 104). Where Achebe uses *Things Fall Apart* to imagine the best possible version of the new nation, Gikandi notes that he takes a different approach in *A Man of the People*, one that attempts to “establish a hermeneutics for the dazzling and often confusing world ushered in, or unleashed by,

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<sup>23</sup> Achebe, Chinua. *The Trouble with Nigeria*, 1.

independence...” (Gikandi, 101). Reading *A Man of the People* as a critique of the new post-independence state and its leaders, as an expression of the tumultuous times of independence is necessary. As Gikandi argues “...the novel’s relationship to its times is actually profound; Achebe was writing in a historical situation which was still incoherent; the form and ideology of his novel was bound to carry the contradictions and confusions of the times... the message is still forming as Achebe writes” (105).

I find Gikandi’s argument compelling, and merely want to suggest that Achebe’s struggle to make sense out of, as well as to critique, the realities of the nation after independence as they were happening becomes clear through a close reading of the novel’s post-independence leader, Chief Nanga and his position as a Big Man. Nanga’s rise to power, the actions he must take to maintain his position, as well as the constant threats to that position can all be read as a commentary on and critique of “the trouble” of the postcolonial state. To clarify, I am not arguing that Nanga’s character symbolizes the process by which Nigeria became a nation, nor is it my position that Nanga should be read as a metaphor for the hope or disappointment of the nation. First, though the resemblance to Nigeria is uncanny, *A Man of the People* is set in an unnamed African state. Furthermore, as Gikandi notes, Nanga should not be read “as an allegory of the promise and betrayal of nationalism” because there is no evidence in the text that suggests that he ever believed “that independence would cure the country of its ills; the minister’s corruption was never the result of a fall from a previous state of innocence or idealism” (108). Rather, I posit that a close examination of Chief Nanga’s Big Man position, and how that position is both maintained and threatened, not only supports Gikandi’s argument regarding *A Man of the People* as evidence of the contradictions and confusions of the time in which Achebe

was writing, but, in emphasizing Nanga's Big Man position, we are also able to draw attention to the political and social structures that make such positions possible.

To begin this discussion of the Big Man in *A Man of the People*, it is necessary to explore the dynamics of the context in which Big Men operate. To do so it may be most helpful to look directly to Achebe. When asked about the factors that enabled the emergence of politicians like Chief Nanga, Achebe replied,

Well, the colonial departure from the scene was not really a departure. I mean independence was unreal, and people like Nanga were actually used as front men, as puppets, by the former colonial power. As long as they could go about saying they were ministers, as long as they enriched themselves, they were happy, and they would leave the real exploiter at his work. So I think in a very basic sense, characters like Nanga flourished because the colonial situation leading to the independence period in Africa made it possible (Lindfors 32-33).

Thus, while Achebe's presentation in *A Man of the People* of Nanga often seems to echo the normative Big Man discourse discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it is important to note that, much like Fanon, in his discussion of the bourgeois middle class, he also situates the African Big Man as a product of the neocolonial situation. More importantly, Achebe's assertion that Big Men like Nanga were "used" as "puppets" by the former colonial powers points to the creation of a political position that can only be filled by those who are willing to "leave the real exploiter to his work."

In his work on the African Big Man, Utas argues that the roots of Big Men networks were "made possible, if not necessary, by political changes on the continent as a partial consequence

of colonialism and related politic-economic endeavors or conquest” (4). Similarly, Emmanuel Akyeampong notes that the introduction of “European commerce and education expanded the opportunities of accumulation and gave ordinary people access to ‘big man’ status” (223), while Andrea Cornwall posits that colonialism wrought changes that opened up “opportunities for men beyond ‘traditional’ forms of wealth and authority” which resulted in “different routes to ‘bigness’, which in turn depend[ed] on and [gave] rise to changing ideals of masculinity. In short, while the African Big Man is a precolonial figure, the interruption of colonialism did not result in the destruction of this social position. Rather, “a modified version of the Big Man survived...” (Holland 123).

This modified version of the Big Man defined success as a “blend of indigenous and Western images: money, wife (wives), generosity towards friends, social drinking, Western clothing, and mannerisms” (Akyeampong 223), while the masculinity associated with it “began to change, melting into Western standards of manhood,” which Holland links to the problematic figure of the native intellectual Fanon warns about (123). Thus, the first generation of nationalist Big Men leaders took with them to power a combination of Western ideals of masculinity and success, and traditional notions of rule. Goran Hyden explains that though patrimonial systems of rule had disappeared, “the norms associated with such systems survived among the leaders of the new nation states” (96). These norms, coupled with the instability and uncertainty of the new nation-state as it was being formed, as well as the role played by the gone-but-not-gone former colonizer, created the perfect space for Big Men to come to power.

In *A Man of the People*, Achebe contextualizes this point in his discussion of how Nanga came to be a Big Man. According to the text, Chief Nanga’s road to becoming a Big Man began when he entered politics sometime after 1948, “and then won a seat in Parliament. (It was easy in

those days – before we knew its cash price.)” (3). Twelve years later, in 1960, Nanga was still “an unknown back-bencher” (3), but the upcoming election provided the perfect opportunity for him to establish himself as a key player. We’re told that a slump in the international coffee market put the government in a dangerous financial crisis. When the Minister of Finance presented the Cabinet with a plan for dealing with the crisis, the Prime Minister rejected it and fired the Minister of Finance and those who supported his plan. With the intention of garnering support for his re-election, the Prime Minister framed his decision in Pan-African nationalist terms and emphasized the dismissed ministers’ western educations as treacherous and anti-African, proclaiming that the “‘Miscreant Gang’... had been ‘caught red-handed in their nefarious plot to overthrow the Government of the people by the people and for the people with the help of enemies abroad’” (5), and then declaring, “From today we must watch and guard our hard-won freedom jealously. Never again must we entrust our destiny and the destiny of Africa to the hybrid class of Western-educated and snobbish intellectuals who will not hesitate to sell their mothers for a mess of pottage...” (6). In framing Nanga’s ascension to Big Man status in this way, Achebe not only positions colonialism as contributing to the political realities of the time, but he quite plainly characterizes those political realities as problematically reactionary, directly responding to colonialism. The reason the Prime Minister is successful in his bid for re-election is not just because the opposing party was “weak and disorganized” (3), but because his rhetoric enabled him to manipulate the people’s knowledge of and experience with colonialism and their hopes for a better future after independence to unite them against a “foreign” enemy: the west/former colonizer.

Furthermore, it was during this election process that Nanga, leading “the pack of back-bench hounds, straining their leash [to disparage the Minister of Finance and his supporters...]

Perspiration pour[ing] down his face as he sprang up to interrupt or sat back to share in the derisive laughter of the hungry hyenas” (5), made a name for himself. In fact, Nanga’s vociferous support of the Prime Minister “was so loud and clear that it appeared later under his own name in the Hansard” (5). In this way, Nanga’s opportunism – a key characteristic of the post-independence African Big Man – is made evident.

Whether or not Nanga really believes that the Minister of Finance is an enemy to the new nation, and whether or not he sincerely believes the Prime Minister is the best leader for the country becomes irrelevant: “What mattered was loyalty to the party” (5). Achebe’s use of the phrases “back-bench hounds” and “hungry hyenas” reinforces this reading. By relying on an imagery of ravenous animals straining against the leash that holds them, Achebe is able to illustrate the political reality of the time: those who want to eat must loyally follow those who have the food. Those who have the food are, if we are to believe Achebe, those individuals filling the positions created by the gone-but-not-gone former colonial powers. Nanga’s hunger for power requires that he support the Big Man Prime Minister. In this way his hunger is alleviated and his loyalty is recognized: he is named the Minister of Culture, consigned a large constituency of his own, and thereby assumes the position of Big Man, with his own loyal followers.

Achebe’s description of the circumstances that led to Nanga’s ascension can also be read as a commentary on one of the nation’s first missteps: Achebe seems to be concerned with the anti-intellectual position of the political elite. In *The Trouble with Nigeria*, he argues that the reason Nigeria “has been less than fortunate in its leadership” is because of “the seminal absence of intellectual vigor in the political thought of our founding fathers” (13). He goes on to argue that “an absence of objectivity and intellectual rigor at the critical moment of a nation’s formation... inclines the fledgling state to disorderly growth and mental deficiency” (14). The

nation-state in *A Man of the People* is clearly suffering from this absence of objectivity and intellectual rigor. And, though Achebe doesn't argue this directly, he does seem to suggest a correlation between the positions created for Big Men, and the sorts of thinkers these men needed to be. That is, the best Big Man for the Big Man position is the Big Man who doesn't think for himself, who, perhaps, doesn't think at all, or who is very good at pretending not to think for himself.

Related to this point is also the nation's reactionary rather than preventative or progressive ideological foundation. If a new nation defines itself merely in response to its former colonizer(s), rather than, as Fanon suggests, situating itself in the "zone of occult instability where the people dwell," it is setting itself up for failure. As Fanon argues, "a nation which is born of the peoples concerted action and which embodies the real aspirations of the people while changing the state cannot exist save in the expression of exceptionally rich forms of culture" (246). Thus when the Prime Minister exploits the people's hope for a better future and feeds off of their fears related to colonialism, he situates the new nation merely in terms of what it does not want to be, rather than in terms of what it already is, what it wants to be, and what it should be. His emphasis remains on the past, rather than on the present, and more crucially, the future, thus, demonstrating his inability to plan for his nation's future.

Nanga's role as a Big Man Minister of Culture provides him access to a great deal of social and political power, but it also requires that he work tirelessly to maintain that power and position. Nanga works to accomplish this feat in a number of ways. First, Nanga's charismatic personality serves to endear him to his followers and garners him greater support. Hyden notes that "the first generation of nationalist leaders had often been able to rely on the charismatic authority that they acquired by virtue of their heroism in leading the struggle against colonial

rule” (97). This is evident in the Prime Minister’s nationalist rhetoric, and it is evident in Nanga’s interactions with his followers.

Nanga’s charisma is evident from the opening lines of the novel which situate him as “the most approachable politician in the country” and as a “man of the people” (1). Nanga relies on this charisma to enlarge his following. The narrator tells us, “The man’s charisma had to be felt to be believed. If I were superstitious I would say that he had made a really potent charm of the variety called ‘sweet face’” (10). As Daloz points out, the primary aim of the Big Man is to acquire a “social capital of loyalties” (280). Nanga uses his charisma to endear himself to his followers, thereby gaining their trust and respect, which in turn reinforces his position and increases his power.

For example, when Nanga, who is extolled as a “warrior” who “fought and drove the white men away” (139), visits Anata Grammar School where he is to give a speech, we’re told that, “The Minister had a jovial word for everyone. You could never think... that his smile was anything but genuine. It seemed bloody-minded to be skeptical” (8). Nanga’s charisma is so great that it not only makes his followers feel cared about on an individual level, but it can disarm his critics. Similarly, when Nanga thanks the principal for introducing him by saying, “Thank you very much, thank you, sir” (10), we see another example of his charisma at work. While this exchange seems rather innocuous, what happens afterward is significant. We’re told that a member of his entourage “raised his voice and said: ‘You see weten I de talk. How many minister fit hanswer *sir* to any Tom, Dick and Harry wey senior them for age? I hask you how many?’” (11). While we could assume that interruptions such as this one were planned ahead of time by Nanga, such an observation doesn’t change the fact that it was effective. We’re told that everyone “agreed that the Minister was quite exceptional in this respect – a man of high position

who still gave age the respect due to it” (11). By calling a lesser man “sir,” Nanga exploits his audience’s acceptance of traditional culture which understands age as deserving of great respect (the implication being, of course, that Nanga is not one of those leaders who embraces Western values and eschews African ones, but that he is a “true” African nationalist), thereby charming them into believing that he is exceptional and deserving of respect. Moreover, Nanga’s immodest response is telling: “Minister or no minister, a man who is my senior must still be my senior. Other ministers and other people may do otherwise but my motto is: *Do the right and shame the Devil*” (11). In this justification, Nanga reinforces his exceptionality by situating himself as different from and morally superior to other Ministers or leaders, giving his audience one more reason to respect him and ensuring their continued support.

Related to his charismatic personality, Nanga also maintains his power and position by fulfilling the expectations of his followers. As Utas contends, “Dissatisfaction among followers may have grave consequences for [the Big Man’s] authority” (7). Nanga works to keep his followers satisfied by meeting their expectations of a Big Man through his wealth (both in his extravagant display of it, and in his generosity with it), through his influence, and through his rhetoric.

While on the surface we know that Achebe intends Nanga’s ostentatious display of wealth to be read as evidence of his corruption, understanding how Big Men operate enables us to see that Nanga’s display of wealth is necessary if he wants to be seen as legitimate to his followers. Utas argues that “a Big Man is primarily, but not only, a political figure associated with opulence. Bigness is in part measured in status symbols and the ability to fill that Big Man role according to social criteria” (7). Likewise, in his discussion of the sub-Saharan African Big Man, Daloz notes that “supporters expect their respective leader to display external signs of

wealth... They revel in the idea that he possesses more prestigious and impressive goods for these are in some way a credit to the whole community..." (281). Thus when Nanga arrives at the grammar school in a Cadillac followed by a long motorcade, and steps out of the car "wearing damask and gold chains..." he is met with cheers (8). As Daloz points out, "the absence of eminence would be disappointing and would be a factor of delegitimization for the Big Man" (281). I will return to this point in my discussion of the character Cash Daddy, but for now it is enough that we understand that Nanga could not maintain his position as a Big Man without reassuring his followers that he has the financial capacity to meet their needs.

Likewise, Nanga uses his wealth to maintain his position as a Big Man by spreading it around. At the celebration following his speech at the grammar school, we're told that "The Minister danced a few dignified steps to the music of each group and stuck red pound notes on the perspiring faces of the best dancers. To one group alone he gave away 5 pounds" (14). Nanga's dancing to the music of each group is another example of his charisma, and reinforces his reputation as a "man of the people," while his giving away of pound notes assures his followers that he has the means to financially demonstrate his appreciation for their support. As Utas contends, Big Men gather and maintain their power through "forms of reciprocity... if the Big Man does not distribute enough largess he will eventually lose his supporters" (8). As is evident from his interactions at the grammar school, garnering the support of people at the local level is crucial to maintaining his Big Man status. In fact, garnering support at the local level is what ultimately ensures support at the national level.

For example, when Nanga decides to take a second wife, and is in the process of working out the bride price, we're told that the girl's father tells her, "This is the time to enjoy an in-law, not when he has claimed his wife and gone away. Our people say: if you fail to take away a

strong man's sword when he is on the ground, will you do it when he gets up...? No, my daughter. Leave me and my in-law. He will bring and bring and bring and I will eat until I am tired. And thanks to the Man Above he does not lack what to bring" (93). We also see evidence of this when Odili visits Nanga's home when a "less fortunate kinsmen" is also visiting (97). The man, who is clearly drunk, calls for a beer, saying, "Honorable Chief Nanga is my brother and he is what white man call V.I.P. ... Me na P.I.V. – Poor Innocent Victim... A bottle of beer de cost only five shilling. Chief Honorable Nanga has the money – as of today. Look at the new house he is building... Do I ask to share it with him when it is finished? No. I only ask for common beer, common five shilling beer" (97). In both of these examples we see the expectations of the Big Man's followers. To maintain his position, the Big Man must meet, and often exceed, these expectations. Nanga, then, is expected to spread his wealth generously, simply because he has it. In exchange, he receives the loyalty of his followers.

Like his generosity with money, Nanga also uses his influence to maintain his position. For example, Chief Nanga offers to get Odili a government position: "By the way, Odili, I think you are wasting your talent here. I want you to come to the capital and take up a strategic post in the civil service. We shouldn't leave everything to the highland tribes... our people must press for their fair share of the national cake" (12). Invoking his position as patron, Chief Nanga says this to Odili in front of all of the other attendees at the grammar school event. In this way, he openly demonstrates his power and influence, and proves to his followers that he is a legitimate Big Man capable of meeting their needs and willing to assist them when necessary. As several scholars have noted, individuals attach themselves to a Big Man's patronage for protection and

because Big Men are capable of offering them advancement.<sup>24</sup> Nanga clearly demonstrates to his followers through this exchange that it is in their best interest to attach themselves to him, while he also seems to imply that to benefit from his Big Man position, these same people need to stay in his good graces.

When Mr. Nwege, the grammar school's principal, makes a faux pas by going on too long with his speech, he angers Nanga. We're told, "It was clear the great man did not easily forgive those who took up part of his time to make their own speeches... [Mr. Nwege] had probably lost the chance of getting on that new corporation for the disposal of dilapidated government wares with which he was no doubt hoping to replace the even more worn-out equipment in his school" (20). Interestingly, Nanga does not loudly announce his plans to withhold his influence from Mr. Nwege, but he does, the text tells us, "ostentatiously [ignore] Mr. Nwege for the rest of the day" (20). Thus, in the same way everyone knows that Nanga's influence will definitely help Odili, everyone also knows that Mr. Nwege has earned the disdain of Chief Nanga, who it's now clear will refuse to use his influence to help Mr. Nwege. Though we know that Odili is employed and therefore not necessarily in great need of a job in the civil service, and though we also know that the grammar school is in desperate need of new or improved equipment, need is not what drives Nanga's decisions to assist others. That Nanga can choose to help Odili because he likes him, and reject Mr. Nwege because he dislikes him is the prerogative of every Big Man, and it demonstrates one of the problems Achebe address in *The Trouble with Nigeria*: "whenever merit is set aside by prejudice of whatever origin, individual citizens as well as the nation itself are victimized" (25). Mr. Nwege's grammar school will

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<sup>24</sup> See work by Daloz (2003), Hyden (2006), Utas (2012)

certainly suffer as a result of this missed opportunity, and Mr. Nwege will certainly realize that so much (that shouldn't) depends upon the whim of the Big Man.

Nanga's "whim" is also evident when he uses a specific rhetoric to maintain his Big Man position. Nanga often reminds the people around him that they are "small boys" or "young people," situating himself as older, wiser, more powerful, and more masculine. For example, at a book exhibition for works by local authors, Nanga insults Mr. Jalio, the President of the writer's society, for wearing "improper" clothing. Moreover, after denigrating his clothing, forgetting his name, and chastising him Nanga asks the man, "And you come to chairman such an occasion like this?" We're then told that "He accompanied the last two words with an upward movement of a scornful left finger, taking in the whole of Mr. Jalio's person" (63). Nanga often takes advantage of social situations to remind others of his position. By openly confronting this writer, Nanga is communicating less about what sort of clothing the writer prefers to wear, and more about what sort of people he approves. In this way, he situates himself as someone others ought to be concerned with pleasing. Furthermore, if we recall the earlier discussion of Fanon, this exchange takes on even greater meaning. That this young man who claims, "I dress to please myself, sir" (64) is an artist, and that this is a cultural event for other artists like him, when Nanga, the Minister of Culture isn't familiar with his work, forgets his name, and derides his clothing choices, we see a State representative who doesn't believe in looking to the future of the nation from that zone of occult instability where the people dwell and where the aspirations of the people thrive, but rather to authoritative ideals of appropriate protocol, which require being in the good graces, and receiving the approval of a Big Man. Clearly this is an example of a nation which hasn't carefully identified its priorities.

In another example, when Odili confronts Nanga about sleeping with Elsie, Nanga responds by saying, “Look here, I will not stomach any nonsense from any small boy for the sake of a common woman...” (74). Nanga clearly establishes himself as a Big Man, and Odili as a nobody. Not only has he demonstrated his dominant masculinity by sleeping with Elsie right under Odili’s nose, but when confronted about it, Nanga refers to him as “any small boy” and to Elsie as “a common woman” (74). In this way, he establishes himself as superior to both Odili and Elsie, and beyond reproach from society’s nobodies.

Finally, Nanga’s need to constantly assert himself and his position demonstrates both the fragility of the Big Man position and the fragility of the new nation. For example, despite his anti-intellectual rhetoric, Nanga is extremely sensitive about his lack of education. When one of the teachers at the grammar school calls Nanga the nickname he had as a teacher, M.A. Minus Opportunity, we see Nanga become very upset (12). The narrator comments that having invented the nickname himself, Nanga used to enjoy it: “His name being M.A. Nanga, his fellow teachers called him simply and fondly ‘M.A.’; he answered ‘Minus Opportunity’. Which he didn’t have to do unless he liked it” (26). The narrator goes on to explain that Nanga’s anger “stemmed from the same general anti-intellectual feeling in the country”: where, as a teacher, Nanga could express regret at not obtaining more education, as the Minister of Culture shortly following independence he had to prove that an education was unnecessary. Though, as the narrator comments, “Of course, he had not altogether persuaded himself, or else he would not have shown such excitement over the LL.D arranged for him from some small, back-street college” (26). As Daloz points out, Big Men must prove that they are capable of meeting the needs and desires of their dependents, and so must constantly do what they can to buttress their image. Education is one way this is accomplished. Daloz notes, “those who are poorly educated suffer

from this defect and are eager to buy an Honorary Doctorate. Any shortcoming is likely to be considered as an inadequacy which is most suspect for both “peers” and supporters” (281). That Nanga feels insecure about his limited education is evidence of the precariousness of his Big Man position. At any time, a more educated, better connected, and richer Big Man can step in and usurp his position.

Achebe also seems to dramatize the limitations of Nanga’s Big Man position through his narrative of Nanga’s interactions with his American friends. First, we see that John and Jean call Chief Nanga by his first name, Micah. The narrator is taken aback, and comments, “I couldn’t understand. I was dead certain that if I or any of our people for that matter had called him Micah he would have gone rampaging mad” (44). Here we see that although Nanga is a Big Man with great authority, that authority exists only within the realm of his nation, or, within the realm of his constituencies or, more specifically, among black Nigerians. Though Nanga requires a certain form of respect from fellow Nigerians, he does not expect this same level of respect from foreigners. The authority of Nanga’s position as a Big Man does not extend to the westerners with whom he interacts. Thus, his position ceases to exist.

Both John and Jean are presented as the quintessential white neo-liberal couple. While Jean ogles Nanga, John extols the virtues of America. Arguing that America has made a great deal of progress, John cites some information to Odili about lynching, and claims “that lynching was not racial in origin and that, up to a certain year, like 1875 or something, there had been more whites lynched than Negroes” and goes on to argue that “America may not be perfect... but don’t forget that we are the only powerful country in the entire history of the world, the only one, which had the power to conquer others and didn’t do it [because] we still believe in such outdated concepts like freedom, like letting every man run his show. Americans have never

wished to be involved in anyone else's show..." (45-46). John's claims about lynching before 1875 are unsubstantiated,<sup>25</sup> his discussion demonstrates a conscious misconception regarding the racial dynamics of lynching in the United States,<sup>26</sup> his claim that America has never conquered another country is debatable, and his failure to see his very own presence as "one of a team of experts... advising [the government] on how to improve its public image" as anything other than involvement in "someone else's show" is laughable. These interactions with Jean and John reveal that to the West, Africa remains an exotic, dark continent that would benefit from a paternal relationship with the West. Nanga's position as a Big Man seems to give him access to people like John and Jean, but it does not make him their equal, and they do not seem to recognize it or, rather, they seem to recognize its authority only for other Africans, not for themselves and people like them, thereby maintaining their white, neocolonial authority.

This is also evident in the sexual objectification of Nanga by Jean, who, we're told, "flirted eagerly with Micah" (44), and who seemed "ready, judging by the look in her eyes, to drag Chief Nanga off to bed in broad daylight" (46). Given the paternalistic tone of John's discourse, the topics of their dinner conversation – the novelty of pidgin English (50), an English art critic's opinion on what he thinks is missing from a statue created by one of the country's leading artists – as well the narrator's description of Jean's over-enthusiastic "waist wiggle" while dancing the highlife (52), it is safe to assume that Jean's interest in Nanga sexually stems from stereotypes regarding African masculinity. Jean sees Nanga as fascinating and finds his

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<sup>25</sup> Reliable statistics on lynching weren't available until 1882.

<sup>26</sup> Most research shows that after 1880, lynching became a ritual of interracial control and mob violence that reflected white American's contempt for people of color, people of non-white ethnic groups, and people belonging to non-Christian religions.

unpredictability attractive – a trait, the reader is left to wonder if Jean would find equally attractive in her husband John.

Additionally, the very nature of the Big Man position works to undermine itself. Nanga must fulfill all of the responsibilities of his position in order to keep hold of it. Failure to do so will result in a loss of followers, power, and authority, and ultimately the Big Man position itself. For example, after handing out money at the grammar school, Odili tells Nanga, “You must have spent a fortune today” To this Nanga responds, “You call this spend? You never see some thing, my brother. I no de keep anini for myself, na so so troway” (14). On the surface it may be hard to believe that Nanga is telling the truth when he says that he doesn’t keep any money for himself – particularly when provided descriptions of his lavish home and equipped with the knowledge that he is in the process of building a new, “Four Storey!” house (97). Yet Daloz notes that the demands made on the Big Man may “frequently force patrons to act against their own immediate economic self-interests in order to meet the obligations on which their social rank and political authority depend” (278). It becomes clear throughout the novel that Nanga must spend a great deal of money to protect his position. For example, when a problem arises with one of Nanga’s projects, we’re told that there’s concern that the Press may find out. Nanga assures a cabinet member that he will take care of the Press: “Don’t worry... I will make sure that they don’t publish it...” (42). The obvious assumption, of course, is that Nanga will pay this newspaper to keep this information out of print.

Similarly, when the Editor of the *Daily Matchet* visits Nanga, we’re told that he “took a very long time to come to the point, whatever it was... he had access to something which he was holding back in Chief Nanga’s interest,” and that, before leaving, he requested some money to deal with a problem with his landlord. After the Editor leaves, Nanga says, “You see what it

means to be a minister... If I don't give him something now, tomorrow he will go and write rubbish about me. They say it is freedom of the Press. But to me it is nothing short of the freedom to crucify innocent men and assassinate their character" (68). Whether Nanga is actually innocent is irrelevant. The point is that if he wants to maintain his position and continue his work, he must be willing to pay off those who threaten it.

A final example of the fragility of the Big Man position becomes clear during Nanga's visit with the Honorable Simon Koko, Minister for Overseas Training. When Chief Koko is given locally brewed coffee, rather than the foreign Nescafé, he prefers, he believes he has been poisoned. After taking a "loud and long sip followed by a satisfied Ahh!", Chief Koko nearly drops his coffee cup and leaps up crying, "They have killed me... They have poisoned my coffee" (33). While Achebe's commentary on Big Man leaders' preference for Western goods rather than "OHMS – Our Home Made Stuff" is clear, for our purposes it is important to note Chief Nanga's behavior during this incident. We're told that on hearing Chief Koko's cries, Nanga calls a doctor. Nanga's anxiety about the situation is evident when, on not making progress with the doctor on the phone, he invokes his authority as a Big Man: "This is Chief the Honorable Nanga speaking... I will see that you are dealt with. Idiot. That is the trouble with this country. Don't worry, you will see..." (34). Though the matter is resolved once the cook assures Chief Koko that he had merely run out of Nescafé, and though Nanga and Chief Koko tease each other about being afraid, it is clear that the incident shook both of them. The narrator notes, "...I don't think [Nanga's] fear had been for Chief Koko's safety either. I suspect that he felt personally threatened" (36). On the drive home from Chief Koko's, Nanga tells Odili, "If anybody comes to you and wants to make you minister, run away. True" (36).

Because of the fragility of the Big Man position, Big Men are constantly in danger of having their position usurped. Not only do multiple Big Men, who often share followers, operate at the same time, but there is an ever-revolving and shifting Big Man hierarchy that operates within and around other ever-revolving Big Men hierarchies. Imagine, if you will, a Big Man version of the children's game, King of the Mountain. Each Big Man attempts to occupy the highest point on the mountain, while other Big Men in the hierarchy attempt to knock them off and supplant them. This "game" is played continuously, involving all levels of Big Men, from President of the country to Governor of the State to local business owner to military officer. It is in this way that we understand the precariousness of the Big Man position: even the biggest of Big Men has the potential to have his position usurped by the very tiniest of Big Men, and this is not merely a loss of position, but a complete fall, leaving the Big Man as a small boy with nothing. We see evidence of this in the novel when the military coup overthrows the government, and locks up "every member of the Government. The rampaging bands of election thugs had caused so much unrest and dislocation that our young Army officers seized the opportunity to take over" (147-148). Thus, during the coup, Nanga is "arrested trying to escape by canoe dressed like a fisherman" (148).

## Chapter Four:

### **“This Protest Masculinity is Not by Chance: Protest Masculinity in Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani’s *I Do Not Come to You by Chance***

“The most foolish argument I’ve heard from the never-ending efforts to discourage young Nigerians from cybercrime is that money isn’t everything. Well, lack isn’t everything either” -  
Nwaubani

“Crime is an equal-opportunity employer...[and] it takes a lot of courage to fuck the system... People are quick to call criminals cowards, but crime takes courage” – Ice T.

It may seem strange to begin a chapter on contemporary Nigerian masculinities with a quote by Ice T., an African American, former gang banger/ pimp turned rapper/actor, yet his comments in his book *The Ice Opinion* on the relationships among crime, poverty, and young, black, males who have been socially and politically disenfranchised by a white-supremacist, patriarchal system that doesn’t value them provides a unique opportunity to examine the undertheorized and underexplored concept of protest masculinity. In this chapter, I seek to further develop my reading of Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani’s *I Do Not Come To You By Chance* (*IDNTYBC*) by exploring how the concept of protest masculinity might highlight the relationship between present-day Nigerian young men and the Nigerian nation-state. I argue that Nwaubani establishes a link between what she calls Nigeria’s somebody/nobody mindset and the protest masculinity of young, Nigerian men. I contend that Nwaubani uses this protest masculinity to draw attention to the sociopolitical and cultural realities that make it so difficult for young men in present-day Nigeria to achieve success “honestly.” Instead, I argue that Nwaubani seems to suggest that protest masculinity offers young Nigerian men a means for fulfilling their gendered expectations in a society that makes masculine success difficult to achieve. While this focus on protest masculinities is significant because it exposes how young Nigerian men redefine their

masculinity in a manner that is meaningful to them, it quickly becomes evident that this redefinition is, like other forms of masculinity, problematically predicated on the continued marginalization and oppression of women. Thus, while the protest masculinities of present-day Nigerian youths enable them to establish themselves as Nigerian *Men*, it does nothing to contribute to the liberation of Nigerian women. As David Duriesmith notes, “Although men who call on protest masculinity may be subordinate to hegemonic men, they still access the benefits afforded them by male supremacy. These men may have lost some portion of the patriarchal dividends that their hegemonic counterparts gain, but they still actively benefit from the domination and exploitatiuon of women” (243).

Though somewhat different from its earliest iteration<sup>27</sup>, Connell initially situated the concept of protest masculinity in his discussion of hegemonic masculinity and class, by describing it as a marginalized masculinity “which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in the context of poverty” (114). According to Connell, protest masculinity develops where the “claim to power that is central in hegemonic masculinity is constantly negated by economic and cultural weakness” (116). Likewise, Curran and Abrams argue that “for men marginalized along the lines of class, race, and sexuality, the state frequently acts as a source of ‘alien’ power and violence. State policies embody and reproduce a ‘hegemonic masculinity’ that legitimatizes the contemporary form of patriarchy. ‘Protest masculinities’ emerge in a dialectical relation to hegemonic masculinity and the state” (664). Later, Connell, writing with Messerschmidt, develops his definition of protest masculinity,

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<sup>27</sup> Initially, the concept of protest masculinity was used in psychological and cross-cultural studies to describe “instances of extreme forms of sex-typed behavior on the part of some males” (Broude 103). This “extreme... sex-typed behavior” nearly always referred to demonstrations of physical aggression, violence, crime, and destructiveness, and early scholars generally linked these behaviors to father-absence (See Whiting 1960; Burton and Whiting 1961; Whiting 1965; Whiting and Whiting 1975; Munroe et al. 1981.)

placing it in the larger global context, and describing it as “a pattern of masculinity constructed in local working-class settings, sometimes among ethnically marginalized men, which embodies the claim to power typical in regional hegemonic masculinities in Western countries, but which lacks the economic resources and institutional authority that underpins the regional and global patterns” (848). Similarly, Cornwall and Lindisfarne argue that protest masculinity is the “final option for those groups who feel they have exhausted other legitimate channels for fulfilling their needs” (24), while Laura Lane-Steele asserts that in contrast to hegemonic masculinity, protest masculinities form under situations of cultural, historical, and economic oppression” (483). The current model for protest masculinity, then, considers class, power, ethnicity, and global positioning, yet, as Chris Haywood and Mairtin Mac an Ghaill argue, “the specific nature of protest masculinities as defined by Connell remains underexplored” (109). Because of this under-exploration of the nature of protest masculinities in general, and because of the dearth of scholarship on the concept as it manifests in African contexts, it is necessary to carefully turn to sources on other marginalized masculinities, such as Ice T.’s book, for additional themes.

Indeed, studies on the masculinities of African American men provide one such model. As Lane-Steele argues, “Unrelenting and brutal attempts to emasculate black men have prevented black masculinity from attaining what Kimmel, Connell and other gender scholars call hegemonic masculinity” (Lane-Steel 482), situating African American masculinity neatly within the context of marginalized masculinities. In fact, several scholars writing on African American masculinity describe a marginalized “protest masculinity” without ever using the term. For instance, there are several studies that discuss how new forms of black masculinities are constructed through hip hop, in support of and in opposition to mainstream patriarchal notions of (hegemonic) masculinity and the state (Sharpley-Whiting 2007; Collins 2006; Forman and Neal

2004; Kitwana 2002; Rose 1994). Similarly, Richard Majors's and Janet Billson's *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, which examines "cool masculinity," is essentially the study of protest masculinity among young, black males living in the inner cities. According to Majors and Billson, "cool pose," or "cool masculinity" refers to "how black males have created a tool for hammering masculinity out of the bronze of their daily lives" noting that young, black men who have been "denied access to mainstream avenues of success... have created their own voice" (2).

Similarly, bell hooks uses the term "gangsta culture" to describe the relationship between black males and labor in an "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchal state" (17). Echoing Majors and Billson who argue that

Black men learned long ago that the classic American virtues of thrift, perseverance, and hard work did not give them the same tangible rewards that accrued to whites. Yet African American men have defined manhood in terms familiar to white men: bread winner, provider, procreator, protector. Unlike white men, however, blacks have not had consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success (1), and Lane-Steele, who notes that "Because of violence, lack of access to political and economic power, and harsh discrimination black men have certainly been historically 'othered' by hegemonic masculinity. This kind of oppression leads to ... outrage and fury... creating protest masculinities" (483), hooks asserts that "every day black males face a culture that tells them that they can never really achieve enough money or power to set them free from racist white tyranny in the work world" (26). Because legitimate work, when available, cannot transcend a racist system, hooks argues that some black males turn to "gangsta culture" to legitimize their

masculinity (27), and notes that with “gangsta culture” comes crime – though “gangsta culture” is also a response to social, political, and economic oppression. According to hooks, “black males choose crime to avoid the hierarchy in the workforce that places them on the bottom” (28). Quoting Ice T., she notes that “crime is an equal-opportunity employer. It never discriminates. Anybody can enter the field. You don’t need a college education... You don’t need white people to like you... There are no applications to fill out, no special dress codes” (Ice T 53). These scholars, among others, who situate black masculinities within the contexts of “coolness,” “gangsta culture,” and hip hop have, in essence, called attention to the protest masculinities of these young, black men, and thus, prove useful to my exploration of protest masculinities in Nigeria.

Certainly, it can be gravely problematic to apply western concepts and/or western experiences to non-western contexts, and there is no denying that African and African American experiences are different in substantial and meaningful ways. However, I’d like to suggest that regardless of location, Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, or elsewhere, the experience of living as a black man under a capitalist, patriarchal, white-supremacist system, shares significant similarities that cannot be overlooked. For instance, in the same way that Majors and Billson argue that “being male and black has meant being psychologically castrated – rendered impotent in the economic, political, and social arenas that whites have historically dominated” (1), Franz Fanon argues that under colonialism and anti-black racism “the black is not a man” (8), Aimé Césaire contends that colonialism instilled fear and taught millions of men to “have an inferiority complex” (43), and Steve Biko laments that under apartheid, the black man “has lost his manhood. Reduced to an obliging shell, he looks with awe at the white power structure and accepts what he regards as the “inevitable position” (28). Moreover, similarities among

economic disenfranchisement are significant. The economic “impotence” referenced by the aforementioned scholars is echoed by Ouzgane and Morrell who note that one of the ways African Masculinity differs from other masculinities is in its relationship to globalization: “while some African men may have been able to enter the global economy on something like equal terms (particularly among well-educated and well-located men in the wealthy south of the continent), most men have felt the weight of globalization as poverty” (7). Both African American and African men, then, seem to experience a similar disenfranchisement under systems of white supremacy – whether that be colonialism, neocolonialism, apartheid, or the United States’ long history of slavery, Jim Crow, systemic anti-black racism, and the prison industrial complex. Thus, the marginalization that deeply affects African American men can, in many ways, also be understood as similar to the marginalization experienced by African men, particularly as it relates to notions of black male success.

In *IDNCTYBC*, Nwaubani establishes a link between male success (Somebody-ness), and what she refers to as Nigeria’s somebody/nobody mindset, which is the result of the social, political, and economic realities of present-day Nigeria. Like Aribisala’s contention in the previous chapter that in Nigeria one is either a Big Man or the scum of the earth, Nwaubani believes that in Nigeria one is either a Somebody or a nobody. In an opinion piece published by the *New York Times*, she argues that “Nigerians are brought up to believe that our society consists of higher and lesser beings,” and that this “somebody-nobody mind-set is at the root of corruption and underdevelopment.” According to Nwaubani, this somebody/nobody mind-set creates a society of individuals who expend all of their energy and talent trying to climb just one rung higher on the social ladder, rather than focusing that ingenuity on moving their nation forward. As is evident in the novel, when coupled with gender expectations for Nigerian men,

this somebody/nobody mindset creates the perfect recipe for the development of a masculinity which challenges hegemonic masculinity.

Consider, for instance, Cash Daddy, the novel's primary Big Man and former nobody. The text tells us that Cash Daddy was born a nobody, the son of "some non-Igbo floozy from Rivers State" (71), and the youngest, illegitimate child of Kingsley's grandfather, a man who, after he died, left nothing behind but "some few plots of empty land," three fighting wives, and twenty-four fighting children. Because they refused to acknowledge Cash Daddy, "the family made a communal decision": Cash Daddy would move in with Kingsley's family. Such arrangements are not uncommon in Nigeria. In the article mentioned above, Nwaubani refers to these children as "househelps" and describes them as "usually teenagers from poor families... In exchange for scrubbing, laundering, cooking, baby-sitting and everything else that brawn could accomplish, either they were sent to school, or their parents were sent regular cash" (n.p.). As the family's househelp, Cash Daddy was not treated as a younger brother and uncle. Instead, he "slept on a mattress on the livingroom floor and ate with a plastic plate on his knees in the kitchen" with the other help (53).

In addition to Cash Daddy, the novel depicts the treatment of other househelps. For instance, despite their own poverty, Paulinus and Augustina board two teenagers, a boy and a girl, as househelps. Kingsley explains that Odinkemmelu and Chikaodinaka "had come from the village to live with us. Neither of them was allowed to sit at the dining table" (17). Not only are Odinkemmelu and Chikaodinaka left out of family meals, but they are shouted at, beaten, and denigrated for their smell, their lack of education, and their inability to speak English. Kingsley tells us, "Their reward wasn't kind. Leaving the village and coming to stay with relatives in town was the only opportunity they might ever get to learn English, watch television, live in a house

with electricity, use a toilet that had a water system, or learn a trade” (25). Despite these opportunities, Odinkemmelu and Chikaodinaka are treated like nobodies. For example, one morning when Kingsley is in a foul mood the househelps greet him kindly. Rather than greet them back, Kingsley merely grunts as he walks past them, before exchanging greetings with his mom and siblings (32). Odinkemmelu’s and Chikaodinaka ‘s nobody statuses make them unworthy of a morning greeting – even from someone who is only a rung or two higher than them on the social and economic ladder.

For like the young Cash Daddy, Kingsley is also a nobody. Despite having a western-educated father, Kingsley grew up poor, wearing clothes from “bend down” boutiques<sup>28</sup> (29), sharing a bed with his brother (24), and eating meals that tasted like saw dust (23). Kingsley remains a nobody even after graduating at the top of his class with a degree in chemical engineering because he is unable to find a job working in his field. The novel is clear: Somebody status requires personal success; personal success means having money; having money makes one a Somebody; and being a Somebody guarantees one the respect they deserve. You’ll recall from the last chapter the treatment Kingsley and Augustine receive at the hospital as nobodies compared to the treatment Cash Daddy receives when he arrives at the hospital far outside the allotted visiting hours. Similarly, when Kingsley first goes to visit Cash Daddy to ask for financial assistance in paying his father’s hospital fees, we’re told that as he waited to be escorted upstairs, he noticed, “five young... well-fed men sitting around the dining table” (131). When Kingsley greets the men, they respond in the same way he had responded to Odinkemmelu and Chikaodinaka, by grunting at him “nonchalantly” (131). Kingsley is a poor, nobody and

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<sup>28</sup> A “bend-down” boutique is where “different grades of second-hand clothing that the people in Europe and America no longer wanted to wear were displayed on waterproof sheets on the ground and sold” (Nwaubani 29).

therefore does not deserve the respect afforded Somebodies. Interestingly, after Kingsley becomes a Big Man in his own right, a Somebody, he once again visits his uncle, only this time the four young men seated at the dining table “greeted [him] fervently” (213). To this greeting, Kingsley “mumbled a reply and marched up, taking the stairs three at a time” (213). Kingsley’s Somebody status not only garners him the respect of men who would have previously scorned him, but in a turn of events, having surpassed these men in status, Kingsley, rather than being grunted at, becomes the nonchalant grunter who no longer waits to be invited into his uncle’s presence, but who marches in, three steps at a time, ignoring the other men as he would the househelp.

Certainly, being a Somebody has its perks, yet Cash Daddy and Kingsley didn’t achieve their Somebody statuses via traditional methods. In fact, despite his humble beginnings as a nobody, and his lacking a formal education – we’re told that he “had repeated several classes more than once, and eventually left secondary school without a certificate” (53) – Cash Daddy acquires Somebody status by becoming incredibly rich. According to local lore, he amassed his fortune as “a 419er, living large off the funds he scammed from unsuspecting foreigners who believed the yarns he spun through emails and faxes” (63). In her discussion of 419ers, Nwaubani notes that according to a brief survey of Nigeria’s 419 communities, there appear to be three distinct categories of scammers. Cash Daddy seems to belong to the first group: “the pioneers of the late 80s and early 90s, common criminals who simply saw yet another opportunity to make a dishonest living” (Nwaubani, n.p.).

For long before he was scamming unsuspecting foreigners, Cash Daddy was hatching other plots to make himself rich. For instance, as a young boy working in his sister Augustine’s sewing shop, Cash Daddy developed a scheme to make money from the sale of sodas to waiting customers: “After selling the real contents to customers, [he] preserved the corks and refilled the

empty bottles with an ingenious brew of water and sugar and salt. Then he replaced the metal corks and sold the repackaged water. Sales from the improvised soft drinks naturally ended up in his pocket” (106). We’re told that he even went as far as yanking the cork with the opener and making a “hissing sound from the corner of his lips at the same time” whenever the sodas were served to a customer who wanted to drink right there in the sewing shop (107). Despite being flogged “in front of everybody in the shop,” being described as “wicked... pure, undiluted Satanism,” and inhuman (“Are you sure this boy is a human being?... Are you sure he’s normal?” (107)), Cash Daddy did not learn his intended lesson. Instead he continued his schemes until he amassed such a fortune as to enable him to purchase multiple cars, travel internationally at whim, and garner the respect of his community.

Cash Daddy’s money-making schemes were nearly always illicit in nature. We’re told, for example that he worked for one of the fathers of 419, Money Magnet, as a personal driver until he decided to “launch out on [his] own” (148). Yet Cash Daddy’s willingness to engage in criminal activities ought to be understood not only as the most viable option for his success, but the most logical option as well. Writing about the protest masculinity of young Somali refugees in Egypt, for example, Martin notes that “although conformity remains the norm even among the most disadvantaged, members of certain groups may be predisposed to deviancy especially in the absence of ‘alternative goals’ such as education and meaningful employment” (26). Cash Daddy was born a nobody, he was unable to find success in school, and his likelihood of obtaining traditional employment was quite low – after all, if Kingsley can’t find work with a university degree, how much more difficult must it be for a man with no education? Therefore, criminal activities were not only the easiest way for Cash Daddy to make money, they were also the most logical choice.

This is even more true for Kingsley, who represents the second generation of 419, made up of “mostly university graduates from decent backgrounds... chance criminals who found respite from the unemployment and hopelessness, in scamming” (Nwaubani, n.p.). Despite his attempts to take the legal and “traditional” routes, Kingsley is unable to find success. Though he “defied all the odds by getting as far as the last interview,” for a job, we’re told that “the way things worked in our society these days besides paper qualifications, and a high intelligence quotient, you usually needed to have ‘long-leg’. You need to know someone, or someone who knew someone, before you could access the most basic things” (34).

In an article published in the *Premium Times* titled, “My Degree is Better Than Yours,” Nwaubani argues that as part of their Somebody/nobody mindset, Nigerians elevate foreign, especially Western, education over Nigerian education, making it nearly impossible for those educated in Nigeria to obtain an interview, never mind secure sound employment. She notes that part of the reason for this thinking is because of the quality and instability of higher education institutions in Nigeria, but also that “it is easier to pass through the eye of a needle than to gain admission into a Nigerian university without having connection or paying bribes.” Nwaubani then goes on to argue that these aren’t the only reasons Nigerian’s prefer western education. She writes, “They have learnt by association, by observing action and reaction. The most highly acclaimed Nigerians, in almost every field of endeavor, have been trained abroad... return[ing] home [to] automatically elevated status... They get the juiciest positions, the highest salaries, and the greatest respect.” Having been educated at the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Kingsley’s “homeschooled” education is no match for those applicants who were educated overseas.

Yet, the novel is clear: even foreign education doesn't guarantee success, that is, it doesn't guarantee that someone will become a Somebody. Paulinus, Kingsley's father, who studied Engineering in the United Kingdom, values education over everything. Kingsley explains, "To my parents, education was everything. She was the recipe for wealth, the pass to respectability, the ticket to eternal life" (18). Be that as it may, despite being a brilliant, walking encyclopedia who "knew every theory of science and every city in the atlas... every word in the dictionary and every scripture in the Holy Bible" (22), Paulinus wallows in poverty as a nobody with nothing to show for his great mind and western education. He cannot provide for his children and wife, he can barely afford to send his oldest son to college, he dies completely destitute, and had it not been for Cash Daddy his burial would have been a disgrace to Igbo tradition.

The novel thus presents the nation's denigration of education in its juxtaposition of the Somebody, Cash Daddy, to both the "homeschooled" nobody, Kingsley, and the Western-educated nobody, Paulinus. Kingsley comments,

My father was learned and honest. Yet he could neither feed his family nor clothe his children. My mother was also learned, and her life had not particularly improved much by education. I thought about my father's pals, most of whom were riding rickety cars... about most of my university lecturers with their boogie-woogie clothes and desperate attempts to fight off hunger by selling overpriced hand-outs to students. Yet Uncle Boniface – our savior in this time of crisis – had not even completed his secondary school education (151).

The novel is clear: in Nigeria, education is no longer the recipe for success – if it ever was. Rather, success for young, Nigerian men is defined as wealth and the ability to provide for one's family.

Cash Daddy relies on this logic to eventually convince Kingsley to join his 419 operation. At first, Kingsley rejects Cash Daddy's proposal, determined to conform to society, explaining that he's a graduate who intends to pursue his education further. Cash Daddy laughs at him and replies

So, after all this your education – the one you've done so far – what have you gained from it? With all the big, big calculations you did with your calculator in school, has it made you to calculate those same amounts of money in your own pocket? Or in your own bank account?... Is that why your sister looks like somebody who hasn't eaten since Christmas Day? Is that why your mother is wearing the cloth that other women were wearing in the sixties?... Has your book put food on the table?... Please don't close my ears with all this your rubbish about education. Me, I don't believe in film tricks. I believe in real, live action... People like you can go to school and finish your brains on book, but it's still people like [me] who have the money that feeds your families. (150-152)

Cash Daddy focuses Kingsley's attention to their society's present reality. While education may be ideal and valuable simply because it helps people feel capable and prepared to determine their futures, the reality is that the life of the mind means nothing if one cannot eat. Cash Daddy is clear: it is better to be an uneducated rich man than it is to be an educated poor man.

Kingsley, though initially incensed by Cash Daddy's comments, eventually comes to agree with him – especially after he realizes that he is failing his family as *opara*, and his girlfriend, as a real boyfriend. Kingsley explains, “As first son, as soon as I started earning an income, I would automatically inherit the responsibility of training my younger ones and ensuring that my parents spent the rest of their retirement years in financial peace. My family were looking up to me. I was their light, their messiah, their only hope” (34). As the hope of this family, Kingsley is very hard on himself. In fact, when his mom offers him some small pocket money, Kingsley thinks about himself: “Disgraceful that a twenty-five year old was still depending on his parents...” (36).

Kingsley takes his responsibility as *opara* seriously. When his brother Godfrey passes his JAMB exam, Kingsley is excited that his brother “had scored enough for admission into one of the best universities in the country”, but is also deeply concerned about the “fresh expense” that would “introduce into [their] lives when [they] were still doing battle with the current ones” (124), especially his father's hospital expenses. As Kingsley watches his siblings celebrate Godfrey's achievement, we're told that he “felt sorry for all of them” (124). In addition to feeling sorry for his siblings, he also feels grateful to Cash Daddy: “he had been so kind, so generous, so helpful. Right now, it did not matter where he got the money from. How would we have made it this far without him?” (142). Despite these feelings of gratefulness, Kingsley is not fully ready to enter Cash Daddy's criminal 419 business until his long-time girlfriend, Ola, dumps him.

Ola, we're told, is “the sugar in Kingsley's tea” (27), so when her behavior begins to change, Kingsley is beside himself. Kingsley first notes a change in Ola's behavior when he goes to visit her after receiving yet another employment rejection letter. Kingsley notes that Ola did not get up to greet him: “where were my yelps and my hugs?” (40) he wonders. Kingsley also

notes that Ola is wearing a brand-new red-strapped Dolce and Gabbana wristwatch, that she has brand-new slippers (41), and that “all of [his] photographs – all three of them – had vanished from her room” (44). Unsure of what to make of this new, cold Ola, Kingsley decides to go. As he leaves, Ola tells him, “you’d better know that my mother is very unhappy with you” (43). Troubled by Ola’s words, Kingsley goes to visit Ola’s mother, to discover that his inability to find a job and provide for Ola has cost him his future mother-in-law’s respect: “I love her, I love her, I love her... love does not keep the pot boiling” (52). When Kingsley attempts to remind her of his troubling situation and the difficulty he’s had finding employment, Ola’s mother dismisses him saying,

Look, let me just make it clear to you. There are other men out there who would gladly marry her... Other men are finding a way... Other men know what and what to do to move ahead. Your own is just different. Is it certificate that we shall eat? If I say that you’re useless, it’ll be as if I’m insulting you. But since you people met, I can’t see anything – not one single thing – that Ola has benefited from you. As far as I’m concerned you’re a complete disappointment. (53)

Despite coming in at the top of his class, despite his being a kind, faithful, and loving partner, Kingsley’s inability to establish himself as a Somebody through gainful employment makes him ineligible for both the status of man and future husband. Ola’s mother is clear: if Kingsley doesn’t have the money to provide for Ola, then he doesn’t have what it takes to be Ola’s husband. Moreover, other men, better men, men who have “found a way” are out there and prepared to take on a wife such as Ola. Kingsley’s inability to make money so that he can provide for Ola ultimately leads to him losing her permanently as she chooses to marry an uneducated but rich young Somebody instead.

The loss of Ola coupled with the responsibility Kingsley feels as *opara* in his family eventually leads him to take up Cash Daddy's offer of a job working for him. In fact, the pressure to provide for his family was so great, that after receiving his first pay, Kingsley explains, "I wanted to jump, to shout, to run through the streets crying, 'Goal!' At last, the Book of Remembrance had been opened and Fortune had called out my name. The sun peeped in through the windows of the dank collection office, and flashed me a smile" (181-182). And, it isn't until after Kingsley begins making money as a 419er working for Cash Daddy, and spending that money on his family, that he finally begins to feel "like a real *opara*" (182), and like "a real elder brother" (196). The emphasis on "real" here highlights what Kingsley understands about society's expectations for Nigerian men: "Real" men, "real" *oparas* provide for their families financially.

Kingsley's and Cash Daddy's illegal 419 business activities enable them to ascend from nobody status to Somebody status, and offers them the space to redefine themselves as men in a social order that doesn't value them as such. Cash Daddy, who was seemingly unfit for a traditional lifestyle, and Kingsley who played by the rules only to be shat upon by society both embrace a risky criminal lifestyle which enables them to feel some semblance of manliness. This is particularly evident in their justifications for their criminal activities.

For example, Cash Daddy and Kingsley rely on a rhetoric of difference to justify their 419 activities. When Kingsley begins to feel guilty for duping a young woman out of her savings, Cash Daddy tells him, "Kings, with all the school you went, you still don't know anything. These *oyibo* people are *different* from us. Don't think America and Europe are like Nigeria where people suffer anyhow. Over there, their governments know how to take good care of them. They don't know anything about suffering. Do you know... if you were a young man

without a job abroad, the government will be giving you money every week? Can you imagine that?” (184-185 emphasis mine). While it isn’t clear whether Cash Daddy believes this about Western countries, or if he’s just trying to convince Kingsley that he shouldn’t feel guilty about scamming a foreigner, what is clear is that, to Cash Daddy, mugus are not like Nigerians. Moreover, the subtext in Cash Daddy’s speech is even more telling in its dual messages: 1) that even on a bad day Westerners have it better than most Nigerians, and 2) Western men are way too comfortable letting their governments provide for them where Nigerian men not only live without government support, but the idea of being supported is unimaginable. Nigerian men, Cash Daddy seems to imply, work to support themselves.

Relying on this rhetoric of difference enables Cash Daddy and Kingsley to justify their scams. Not only are mugus different culturally – loving dogs named after Africans more than actual African people, for example – but their lives are different, easier (“I tried to imagine a life with access to that kind of money. Glorious. All my problems solved forever”(245)), and their greed makes them different (“Did they really expect to receive so much money without *doing* anything substantial?” (205 emphasis mine)). In this way, it was easy for Kingsley to think, “I was not hurting anyone by taking a little of what the Winterbottoms of this world had. There was much, much more where those millions came from” (245).

Beyond this rhetoric of difference, Cash Daddy and Kingsley also justify their exploitation of mugus through a rhetoric of men’s responsibility to family. When Kingsley is not quite convinced that he’s doing the right thing, Cash Daddy says to him, “OK. Since you don’t appreciate this opportunity God has given you to abolish poverty from your family once and for all, continue worrying about one *oyibo* woman in America. Be there worrying about her and leave off your own sister and your mother” (184). To make his point, Cash Daddy reminds

Kingsley of his responsibilities as *opara* to his family, as well as his responsibility to his community, leading Kingsley to conclude,

Cash Daddy was right. Not being able to take care of my family was the real sin.

Gradually, I had learnt to take my mind off the mugus and focus on the things that really mattered. Thanks to me, my family was now as safe as a tortoise under its shell. My mother could finally stop picking pennies from her shop and start enjoying the rest of her life. My brothers and sister could focus completely on their studies without worrying about fees. Mirabelle had her problems, I had mine. (185)

For Kingsley this responsibility to family is a sore point because he somewhat guiltily believes deep down that his own father had failed his family: “my father was learned and honest. Yet he could neither feed his family nor clothe his children” (151). As a result, Kingsley wants to provide as much as he can to his siblings, to whom he feels sorry for their impoverished upbringing. He tells the reader, “I wanted to be as much of a father... to them all – as possible. I wanted to be there for them in ways that my father had never been there for me” (293).

One way Kingsley accomplishes this is by paying for his siblings school fees so that they can study without worrying about whether or not their fees will be covered the next term. Cash Daddy, too, provides for the education of many, including his own children, which he sends to prestigious boarding schools in the UK, claiming about his first born son: “I know that boy is going to be great in this world. Greater than me even” (215). Like Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People*, Cash Daddy is quite sensitive about his own lack of education. This is particularly evident when he has to fill out the nomination form to run for governor. Without touching the form, Cash Daddy tells Kingsley to fill it out, and when Kingsley inquires about what to put in

the section regarding his education, Cash Daddy bangs his hand on his desk saying, “What’s wrong with you people?” Can’t you fill a simple form without asking me stupid questions?... Please get out of my office and go fill that thing somewhere else. You people are starting to get on my nerves” (257). Cash Daddy is self-conscious about his lack of education, even though he’s become quite successful without one. Likewise, Kingsley, who by this time has become a Big Man in his own right, goes ballistic when his younger brother, Godfrey, tells him that he wants to quit school. Kingsley beats Godfrey, destroys all of the material goodies he’s purchased for him, and kicks him out of his house, saying: “Godfrey, is your head correct? Have you been drinking? Are you on drugs?... Just forget about it. End of discussion... It’s not my business what else you do with your life, but you must remain in school and you must graduate. Don’t ever raise the matter again” (375-376).

Both Kingsley’s and Cash Daddy’s determination to see their wards educated, as well as Cash Daddy’s self-consciousness about lacking an education seem to contradict the contemporary Nigerian mind-set regarding education that Nwaubani has so conspicuously presented throughout the novel. Yet, I want to suggest that this is not so much a contradiction, as it is evidence of the conflict between ideals and reality. In his discussion of protest masculinity and deviancy, Martin contends that “motivational schemes (i.e., social acceptance through the attainment of masculine responsibilities such as work, marriage, and fatherhood) endorsed by patriarchal authority are effectively unobtainable for young men of limited means and prospects even though these goals remain desirable as a gendered ‘anchor’ in an otherwise uncertain social environment” (26). Despite being mostly unobtainable – or, if obtainable, incapable of guaranteeing successful employment, education remains a desirable ideal for young men who want to succeed. That Cash Daddy and Kingsley want to see their wards educated is indicative of

the hope such an ideal offers, while their own participation in criminal activities makes it possible for them to provide for their wards in the here and now, thereby reinforcing their positions as the Men of their families, and enabling them to offer the next generation hope, and a means to achieve success that doesn't require an engagement with the criminal world.

Nigerian men's responsibility to family is further reinforced in their discussions among one another. For instance, on one of Kingsley's early visits to Cash Daddy's business, they are interrupted by "one of Cash Daddy's friends who also suffered from elephantitis of the pocket," World Bank, International (121). Cash Daddy and World Bank discuss Kingsley's thin, disheveled look, and go on for some time about the trouble of wives when they are interrupted by a call to World Bank's cell phone. We're told that World Bank "looked at the screen and hissed" before explaining that one of his future mother-in-laws was hassling him about getting her a camcorder: "I didn't run away when she told me they wanted to renovate their house, I didn't run away when she told me she wanted to open a nursery school. Why should I start running away simply because of an ordinary camcorder?" (121). In response to World Bank's complaints, Cash Daddy tells him, "Just be a man and bear it... You know that relatives are the cause of hip disease" (121). Cash Daddy's advice to "be a man and bear it" communicates some sort of resignation for these men. It seems, to be a 'real' man, is to be a man of means to whom everyone goes with their needs and wants, and for whom denying such a request is impossible. 'Real' men don't complain about all of the requests they receive. Rather, they "man up", bear it, and buy their relatives whatever it is that they way.

Yet, these men's family responsibilities go beyond blood relatives, these responsibilities reach much further into their communities. Kingsley explains, "Siphoning from foreigners in parts of the world where the economy was sound was one thing, but stealing from your own

brothers and sisters who had entrusted you to serve was the abyss of wickedness, especially when you had the firsthand opportunity to witness their daily sufferings and struggles” (245).

Thus, Cash Daddy and Kingsley see their 419 work as fulfilling their responsibilities not only to their individual families, but also to their own people, their community family, who depend on them.

Interestingly, Cash Daddy, Kingsley, and the novel’s other 419ers also justify their work through a rhetoric of compensation. This is communicated in two ways. First, they rely on a rhetoric of compensation as a means of balancing the scales for the history of slavery, colonialism, and exploitation and, second, they rely on a rhetoric of compensation to punish contemporary westerners for their present-day racism and antipathy towards Africa, as well as their willingness to believe stereotypes about Africa and Africans. For instance, Cash Daddy tells Kingsley, “You, you went to school Did they not teach you about slave trade?... Who were the people behind it? And all the things they stole from Africa, have they paid us back?” (184), and later Kingsley thinks to himself, “What was there to be guilty about? Was anybody feeling guilty about the artifacts and natural resources pilfered from Africa over centuries? My mugus were merely fulfilling their role in the food chain” (301). Both Cash Daddy and Kingsley are of the mindset that they are entitled to the money they scam from their western mugus because, to their minds, the West is responsible for their current situation.

In his discussion of the novel, Hamish Dalley contends that while the 419ers rhetoric of righting the scales “defuses criticism of 419 by asserting the amorality of international relations, it also implicitly legitimizes imperialism by suggesting that any society, once strong enough, will strive to dominate others” (23). Dalley then goes on to argue that “their understanding of history as a process of oscillation between centers of dominance and peripheries of exploitation cannot

lead to the development of a more just society, but only to ceaseless, nondirectional change, as the exploited break their chains and enslave their masters in turn” (24). While I find Dalley’s assertions interesting, I disagree with his reading. While it is true that the 419ers do seem to understand their world in terms of survival, and while they do pay lip service to the notion of a “food chain” the fact is that their reality truly is shaped by the struggle to survive. They aren’t driven by a desire for revenge; they’re driven by a desire to eat, to determine their own futures, and to be viewed as Somebodies, as people who matter.

Furthermore, while the 419ers might enjoy the idea of ruling their former rulers – though there’s no evidence of this in the text; there is no discussion of ruling the West whatsoever – the reality is that they know this is not possible. This is evident in the very rhetoric they use to justify their scams in the first place: the mugus are different, primarily because they have so much; taking a little from someone who has a great deal can hardly be considered a crime; people who have so much should be willing to share with those who don’t. If they are unwilling to share, but so driven by greed that they are stupid enough to be duped out of their money (of which many of them have millions more), then that too is their own fault. I want to suggest that 419ers aren’t attempting to balance the scales. Rather, they are creating a means by which they can legitimize themselves as men in a national and global context that seems only to recognize money, power, and whiteness.

In an interesting parallel, while visiting the United Kingdom, Kingsley recalls having a German girl in this primary four class. He explains that everyone wanted to be near her, to touch her hair, because whiteness was such a novelty, but because he was the top student, he was the one chosen to sit next to her. Kingsley explains, “Standing up to answer a difficult question one day, I pressed the heel of my shoe against her toes. I just wanted to hear what it sounded like

when she screamed” (226). Like young Kingsley, the 419ers are merely trying to hear what it sounds like when their mugus scream. Stepping on the German girl’s toe didn’t balance the scales, it didn’t somehow change the fact that her father was an “engineer with the Golden Guinea Breweries” or that Kingsley was living in poverty, in the same way that defrauding mugus doesn’t change the fact that they have the money in the first place, and that the 419ers don’t – at least not initially.

Finally, while it would appear that their “eat or be eaten” mindset is preventing 419ers from making progress, this is not the case. This is not to say that their rhetoric is unproblematic. Rather, I simply want to suggest that discussions of progress and “real” social transformation in a world of systemically maintained and reinforced inequalities and power imbalances must avoid simple critiques that understand the actions of the oppressed only in terms of what the colonizer would do. In short, a critique of the oppressed should not use the perspective of the oppressor to argue that the oppressed want merely to become the oppressor. Such a critique serves only to further silence and invalidate the voices of the oppressed, who, in this case, have very few, if any, alternatives available to them.

A more productive critique of the 419ers “eat or be eaten” mindset might suggest that when 419ers claim they are merely balancing the scale for past wrongs committed to their nation, what they are in reality doing is making it possible for the west as a whole to feign innocence in the projects of colonialism and neocolonialism. This argument positions the original perpetrator as a victim, and the formerly marginalized as the perpetrators. Yet even this position is problematic because it assumes that these young men are nationalists seeking compensation for their nation rather than poor, disadvantaged individuals seeking money for themselves and their families.

I want to suggest, similarly, the 419ers rhetoric of compensation is also framed as a response to Western racism toward blacks, their bigotry towards Africans, and their acceptance of stereotypes about Africa. For example, 419ers are aware of their nation's international reputation for being corrupt, and they use this reputation to their advantage. Kingsley exploits Western assumptions about Nigerian corruption when he writes to one of his mugs, "But my dear friend, there is a lot of corruption in Nigeria and people get up to all sorts of devious things" (202). In fact, in its most basic sense, the fraud committed by the novel's 419ers would not be possible if Nigeria did not have an international reputation of corruption. Several of the emails sent to potential victims rely on this reputation to draw them in and keep them involved. Making statements like, "The government is unaware of this money. If not they would have confiscated it along with the rest" (203), and "My son, Mohammed, is under detention for an offense he did not commit" (178), as well as buzzwords like "regime," "coup," "torture," and "bribes," 419ers confidently exploit not only Nigeria's reputation for being corrupt, but the uninformed assumptions westerners have about Africa.

For example, Wizard, a 419er pretending to be "Suzie" a make-up artist from New Jersey who is on a business trip in Nigeria, is in the process of scamming a lecherous fellow in Utah. The man tells "Suzie", "by the way, babe, you gotta take good care of yourself and watch out, OK? ... I saw on CNN sometime that the folks in Nigeria are real dangerous" and then "while you're out there, you'd better watch out for diseases, especially HIV. I hear almost all of them over there have got it" (191). When Wizard tries to shift the HIV stereotype from Nigeria to South Africa, the man responds, "all them places are all the same thing to me" (192). It was at this point, we're told, that Kingsley "stopped feeling sorry for the mugu" (192).

Finally, Cash Daddy, Kingsley, and the other 419ers's protest masculinity is evident in their rhetoric of benevolence. Though Kingsley notes that "Blaming problems on 419ers had turned into a national pastime," he also notes that "it all depended on which part of the elephant you could feel" (263). We know, for instance, that Cash Daddy paid for Paulinus's traditional burial, that he was "personally responsible for the upkeep of the 221 orphans in the Daughters of St. Jacinta Orphanage, Aba. He tarred all the roads in [Augustine's] local community. He dug boreholes, installed streetlights, built a primary health care center" (263), and that "for the past five years, [he] had been giving scholarships to every single law student from Isiukwuato Local Government Area who was studying in a Nigerian University" (371). Thus it is easy to see why Kingsley concludes, "So, no matter what the media proclaimed, we were not villains, and the good people of Eastern Nigeria knew it" (264).

While Cash Daddy, Kingsley, and the other 419ers call on protest masculinity in order to stake a claim to manhood through their risk-taking and money-making criminal ventures, their attempts to situate themselves on an even playing field with other men do nothing to shift the gender order onto a more equitable plane. Though Cash Daddy is always depicted as a sexist who sees women as objects, saying things like, "Let me tell you something. Women are like babies. Just give them whatever they want and they'll keep quiet. Don't mind all of their *shakara*. The only time a woman becomes dangerous is when there's nothing else she wants from you" (260), Kingsley's casual sexism at the beginning of the novel seems to grow into a deeper misogyny the further he journeys into his criminal 419 business.

For example, early on in the novel, Kingsley explains why he likes Ola so much saying, "Unlike most girls who had developed a penchant for bleached skin, hers glowed flawless ebony. She also looked innocent. I did not need to be an expert on women matters to

know which girls had dabbled in more than their fair share of promiscuity and which were vampires – female Draculas on a mission to drain your bank balance dry. It was as if these girls gave off some peculiar pheromones. Perhaps Nature, knowing that man would someday need it for self-preservation, had implanted this sixth sense so that common folks like me could identify them” (27).

Kingsley doesn't think particularly highly of women. Rather, he seems to perceive them as naturally deceptive, and fundamentally materialist. Kingsley separates Ola from these kinds of women, claiming that he likes her because she “was the only person who [told him he] was hilarious,” because “she did not talk much but she always listened attentively when [he spoke]” (27), because her fingernails and toenails were always clean. Her hair never stank... She always wore her makeup light and natural and she still had some hair remaining from her eyebrows” (31). Kingsley describes his love for Ola as “tipping on the verge of insanity” (31), yet he can say nothing about who Ola is as a person, only that she's clean, that he likes her appearance, and that he likes that she leaves the talking to him. Ironically, what Kingsley doesn't know about Ola is what causes him to lose her. Ola, it would seem, is a “female Dracula” who doesn't wish to waste her time with a poor man, a poor nobody like Kingsley.

Kingsley also abhors women who are outspoken. When Ola's friend intervenes on Ola's behalf as she attempts to break up with Kingsley, he refers to her four times as “the termagant”. In fact, after referring to this young woman as “the termagant” the first time, Kingsley makes some disparaging remarks about the young woman's ethnicity and accent, and concludes by saying, “I ignored the idiot” (93). Yet Kingsley's hatred of outspoken women is best expressed in his disdain for his Aunt Dimma, his mother's sister. Kingsley suspects that it is “probably because she was a liberated woman” that Aunt Dimma “usually spoke in a loud, red-hot voice

even when she was not angry” (102). Kingsley goes on to bemoan the fact that Aunty Dimma “also had an opinion about everything – from the second-class status of women in Igbo-Land to the status quo in Mongolia. And she always made sure that her voice put the final full stop to every conversation” (102). Kingsley concludes by commenting that “the only factor hindering Aunty Dimma’s complete metamorphosis from liberated woman to full-fledged man was that she had not yet grown a beard” (102). Later, Kingsley becomes angry with Aunty Dimma and thinks to himself, “what made her think I liked the person she had become? She used to be less opinionated and less aggressive. If Aunty Dimma so badly wanted to be a man, she could at least try being a gentleman” (332). Certain that Aunty Dimma cares whether or not Kingsley likes who she is, Kingsley situates himself as an authority figure, even in the life of his adult aunt. Because he is now the primary provider for the family, and the nephew who bought her her new refrigerator, Kingsley believes that the women in his life should fall in line and behave in ways that he deems appropriate. Clearly, for Kingsley, speaking one’s mind is not appropriate behavior for a good woman.

In fact, the depth of Kingsley’s dislike for Aunty Dimma, the liberated woman, is evidenced in his brief relationship with Merit. Kingsley explains, “Merit’s company was a true delight. She could discuss any topic intelligently, her opinions always made sense, but unlike Ola, she was quick to say whatever she thought. At first, I was concerned that she might be an aunty Dimma in training, but Merit knew the limits of womanhood” (361). Yet, Kingsley is clear, the best thing about Merit was that since he began dating her, he hadn’t seen his regular prostitute: “And best of all, since meeting Merit, I had never once rung Camille” (361), or any of the others whose names Kingsley conveniently seems to have forgotten (331).

Kingsley's relationship with Merit ends when she discovers his illegal business activities, telling him, "I don't believe you had me fooled. Did you really think I wasn't going to find out? What you do for a living?... I am not that type of girl, OK? I'm not into guys like you. Just stay out of my life. Please." (346). After Merit hangs up, Kingsley throws the phone, feeling sorry for himself:

Was I not still Kingsley? Was I not the man who had come to my family's rescue after my father had failed? Was I not the man setting aside my own dreams for the sake of my mother and my siblings? ... What a rotten world. Other poor people found women to marry them, other 419ers were besieged with desperate Misses. Maybe I was the one who suffered from bad luck – surrounded by ingrates and utopians. But no matter what... I would never go back to a life of poverty and lack. Not for anyone dead or alive. Perhaps Merit would understand... I was not a criminal. I had gone into 419 so that my mother could live in comfort and my siblings have a good education" (374).

Kingsley views himself as the savior of his family, who sacrificed his own dreams for their well-being. He has come to believe, that such a "sacrifice" entitles him to women. Certainly if poor women could find wives, and if other 419ers were "besieged" with "desperate" women, Kingsley ought to be entitled to just one. That Merit doesn't want to be with Kingsley because of his criminal activities doesn't seem reasonable to Kingsley, so he classifies with others, like his mother, who disapproves of his work, as ingrates and utopians.

By the end of the novel, Cash Daddy has been murdered and Kingsley has married Thelma, one of Charity's friends, "The girl, whose breasts were as big as if her chest were nine months pregnant with twins" who flirted with Kingsley at Charity's graduation by "digging her

foot into [his] calf’ but who he never followed up with “because she was not [his] -type and he] did not want to fool around with [his] little sister’s friend” (327-328). Nobody Kingsley, in his own conservative sexism, never would have given Thelma the time of day. She was nothing like Ola, or Merit. In fact, she had had more than her “fair share of promiscuity,” she openly chased only after men who had money, and she openly flirted with Kingsley, despite being several years younger than him, and at her good friend’s graduation dinner. That Kingsley has married her isn’t a testament to his broadened ideals regarding women. Rather, it is evidence that more than ever, he now sees women as objects he can own and do with as he pleases. Thelma’s materialism makes her an ideal wife for Kingsley who can provide her with all her wants, without being admonished for his criminal activities.

Though, by the end of the novel, Kingsley is a Big Man Somebody, sporting a pot belly, and employing his mother’s former househelp Odinkemmelu to work in his new 419 cover-business, KINGS VENTURES, a man much closer to the hegemonic ideal, his performance of a protest masculinity is what enabled him to achieve his success. While this certainly isn’t the case for many men who rely on protest masculinity, in Kingsley’s case, it seems to have given him the confidence he needed to become the opara and man he always wanted to be.

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<sup>i</sup> Not only was Nkrumah depicted as a man of the people, but many cartoons depicted him as a deity. Baba G. Jallow notes that these cartoons were “songs in praise of the leader, highly inflated hagiographics and adulations of Nkrumah” (87). Unlike Koomson, whose body is huge with excess consumption, Nkrumah’s modest body, at least initially, carries the markers of Ghana’s.

<sup>ii</sup> Interestingly, after the coup that overthrew him, Nkrumah was depicted in newspaper cartoons not as a fat “Koomson” but as monstrous, often zoomorphic creatures. In a cartoon published one day after the coup, Nkrumah is depicted as a naked monster-human running away from the people with the state treasury [figure 1]. Another cartoon published March 6, 1966, depicts Nkrumah as a giant monster squeezing money out of the people and into his own pocket [figure 2]. Other cartoons depict him as a rapist [figure 3], a rat [figure 4], an octopus [figure 5], as a snake [figure 6], and as an animal-like Nebuchadnezzar [figure 7]. All of these images depict Nkrumah as a succubus, greedily draining the people he betrayed.





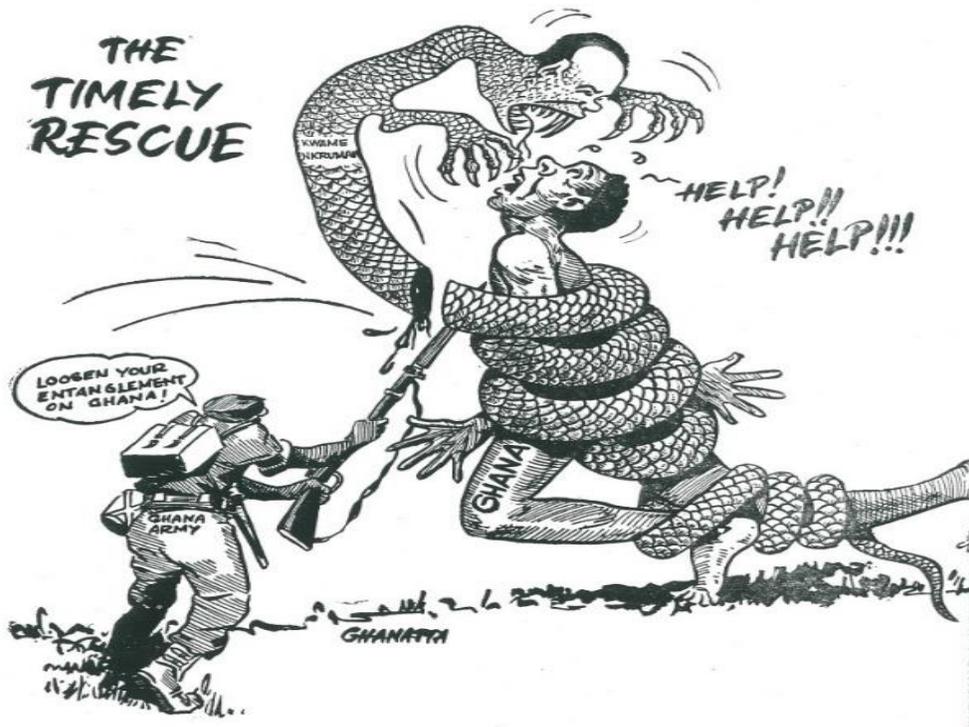
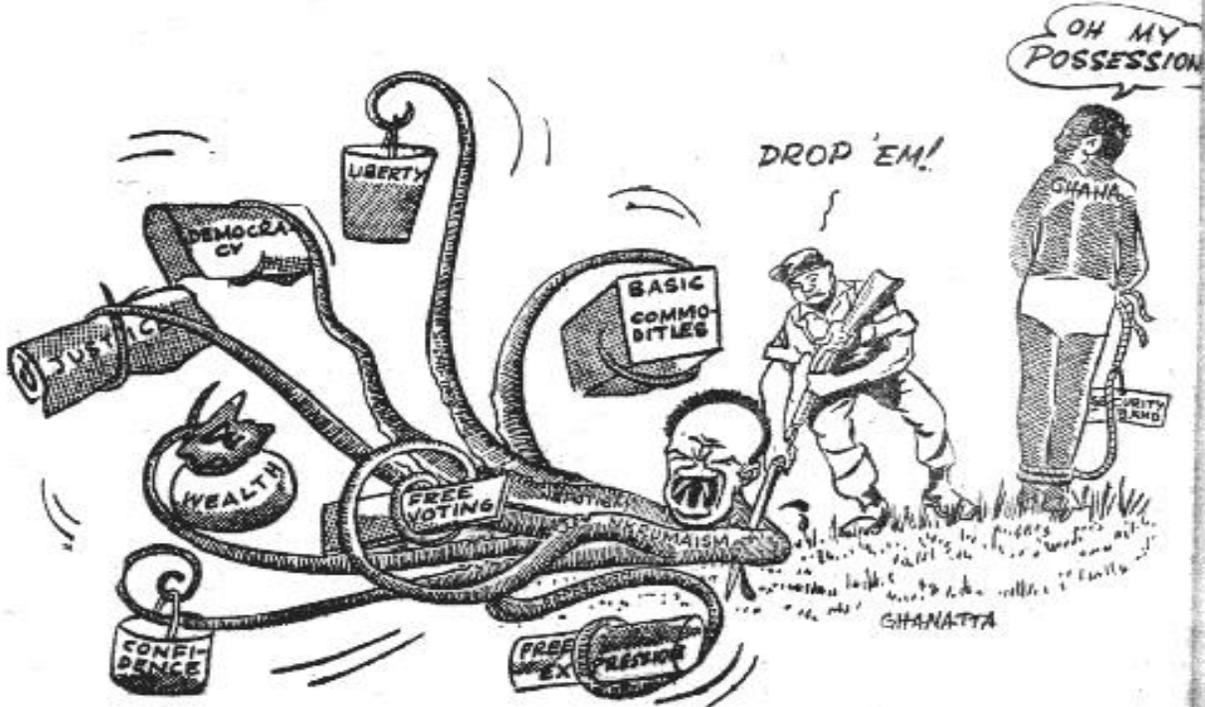
# NKRUMAH-RAPING OUR GIRLS



# NATIONAL TREASURY EMPTIED.



# NKRUMAH—THE VICIOUS OCTOPUS



NKRUMAH HAS FALLEN FROM GRACE TO GRASS  
LIKE NEBUCHADNEZZAR

