

DISMANTLING THE CENTER FROM THE MARGINS:  
PATRIARCHY AND TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE BY WOMEN

By

Joan Conwell

November, 2011

Director of Thesis: Richard Taylor, PhD

Major Department: English

This thesis explores the idea that transnational women writers are liminal figures: marginal as women, marginal as writers, and marginal as transnational personae “betwixt and between” nations. Authorial liminality provides a vantage point that is neither fully inside nor fully outside the system, and therefore privileges intimate literary confrontations with patriarchy. Beginning with a general discussion of transnational women writers, *otherness*, and *liminality*, the thesis progresses to more specific tropes—border crossing, Third Space, the subversive use of religious imagery and symbol, and the interplay between silence and voice—identified as anti-patriarchal devices in the works of contemporary transnational women writers. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, Elif Shafak’s *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*, and Fadia Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt* are discussed as novels emblematic of anti-patriarchal fiction by contemporary transnational women writers, and the thesis explores the four tropes in the context of these works.



DISMANTLING THE CENTER FROM THE MARGINS:  
PATRIARCHY AND TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE BY WOMEN

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English  
East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
The Degree of Master of Arts in English

by

Joan Conwell

November, 2011

© Joan Conwell, 2011

DISMANTLING THE CENTER FROM THE MARGINS:  
PATRIARCHY AND TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE BY WOMEN

by

Joan Conwell

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_ Richard Taylor, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ Ellen Arnold, PhD

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_ Andrea Kitta, PhD

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH:

\_\_\_\_\_ Jeffrey Johnson, PhD

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL:

\_\_\_\_\_ Paul J. Gemperline, PhD

I dedicate this thesis to my loving daughter Victoria: fly, fly, fly.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank my thesis committee, Dr. Ellen Arnold, Dr. Andrea Kitta, and especially my thesis director, Dr. Richard Taylor, for their encouragement, enthusiasm for my work, and interest in my ideas. Graduate school has been a pleasure under their tutelage.

I would like also like to thank Jim Conwell and Victoria Conwell for their patience and understanding while I was writing. Finally, I wish to thank my parents for their unconditional love and support.

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER 1: A SUITCASE OF ONE’S OWN: <u>A</u> MBIGUITY, OTHERNESS, AND THE LIMINAL TRANSNATIONAL WOMAN WRITER .....	5
CHAPTER 2: CONFRONTING PATRIARCHY ON BORDERS AND IN THIRD SPACE .....	16
CHAPTER 3: OUR FATHER WHO ART IN THE NATIONAL PALACE: RELIGIOUS IMAGERY, SUBVERSION, AND PATRIARCHY .....	30
CHAPTER 4: WRITING PAST SILENCE .....	42
WORKS CITED .....	50



## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I argue that transnational women writers are liminal figures: marginal as women, marginal as writers, and marginal as transnational personae “betwixt and between” nations. It is that marginality that uniquely situates transnational women writers to creatively challenge and deconstruct the systematic oppression of women, whether it occurs in the home, church, or state. When we are neither all the way “in” nor all the way “out,” we get a very good look at what is both right and wrong about any given place. To develop my hypothesis that transnational women writers’ liminal position privileges their literary confrontation with patriarchy, I approach the topic from several angles. I begin with a general discussion of transnational women writers, *otherness*, and *liminality*, and progress to more specific tropes—border crossing, Third Space, use of religious symbol to subvert religious authority, and the interplay between silence and voice—which I identify as anti-patriarchal devices in the works of contemporary transnational women writers.

In Chapter 1, “A Suitcase of One’s Own: Ambiguity, Otherness, and Transnational Woman Writers,” I draw from early feminists such as Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir to present women writers as “Other” and consequentially liminal, a term borrowed from symbolic anthropology. I also adapt the ideas of key postcolonial thinkers like Homi Bhabha and scholars of transnational literature such as Azade Seyhan to broadly define transnational literature and show that it too is on the margins “betwixt and between” national or collective group literatures. This leads into a discussion of the responsibility felt by some transnational women writers to confront oppression and how that confrontation makes for a dangerous occupation.

In Chapters 2 through 4, I discuss novels by four contemporary transnational women writers: Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Elif Shafak, Edwidge Danticat, and Fadia Faqir. Because Adichie's novel *Purple Hibiscus* distinctly exemplifies all four anti-patriarchal tropes I identify, I use that novel as a paradigm of the political possibilities inherent in transnational writing by women. I begin each chapter with an analysis of the anti-patriarchal trope as it appears in *Purple Hibiscus* and then follow with discussion of the trope in one of the other three novels, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *The Dew Breaker*, or *Pillars of Salt*.

Chapter 2, "Confronting Patriarchy on Borders and in Third Space," transitions from the idea of the transnational woman writer as liminal to the use of liminal space in specific works of fiction, investigating how border crossings and liminal Third Space can function in texts as "spaces of enunciation" in which to confront patriarchy. In this chapter, I look specifically at the use of border crossings and liminal Third Space in *Purple Hibiscus* and Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*.

In Chapter 3, "Our Father Who Art in the National Palace: Religious Imagery, Subversion, and Patriarchy," I return to Adichie's novel and also examine Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* to show how these two authors employ religious symbols in their works to expose, ironize, and deconstruct patriarchy's exploitation of people's religious beliefs in order to self-aggrandize and secure their grip on power. These are ideas I have played with for a few years; the section in Chapter 3 on *The Dew Breaker* draws from an essay of mine on the same subject that appeared in the journal *Obsidian III: Literature of the African Diaspora*.

Chapter 4, "Writing Past Silence," discusses silence and voice in *Purple Hibiscus* and in Faqir's novel, *Pillars of Salt*; specifically I discuss how tropes of silence, voice, and self-representation appear in the works to challenge patriarchy. The chapter was inspired by the

tremendous swell of popular uprisings that traveled the world in 2011, from Egypt to Oakland, and the revolutionary women everywhere who heard their own voices out loud for the first time.

My choice of authors and works to examine in Chapters 2 through 4 was not arbitrary. All of the novels investigated here confront and deconstruct patriarchal systems. To explore ideas about transnationalism and literature, I compare works by female writers born in geographically diverse locales but who later moved from place to place; these writers were born in Nigeria, Turkey, Haiti, and Jordan respectively, but relocated to or spent years in other locales including the United States and England. It is common to see studies positing the *otherness* of particular religious or ethnic groups, Muslim women or Chicana writers, for example.<sup>1</sup> It is less common to say that women writers who move from place to place are liminal, regardless of where they begin life. To use the example of Adichie, to label her as an African writer or even a Nigerian writer does not allow for the large periods of her adult life spent on other continents; to call her a Yale writer is reductive in an entirely different way. The transnational descriptor, while still a label, allows for the simultaneous coexistence of multiple facets of identity. As more and more of us live nomadic, global lives, it seems appropriate to examine transnationalism as a component of identity in its own right, rather than parceling literature and identity solely on the reductive basis of ethnic or religious affiliation.

A political novel that doesn't tell a story well is meaningless beyond the academy. If a political novel doesn't, through its non-political merits, engage people who aren't already concerned about injustice, it will never inspire a non-activist to action, nor will it function as entertainment. There are too many postcolonial novels that fail to tell a story well or evoke genuine empathy in most readers. Happily they don't include the novels I address here, which,

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, as I complete this thesis, I find that a new book has come out by a Saudi academic entitled, *Transformations of the Liminal Self: Configurations of Home and Identity for Muslim Characters in British Post-Colonial Fiction* (Amazon.com).

although challenging for the brutality they depict, are nevertheless engaging, poignant, and often eloquent. All the works discussed in this thesis are good novels, although, admittedly, “good” is a dualistic and subjective term. Moreover, by stressing the presence of the same literary tropes in novels whose authors begin life in such vastly different geographical and cultural milieux, I wish to suggest that identifying multifaceted transnational women authors as transnational, rather than identifying them by nation, ethnicity or religion, opens new avenues for future scholarship, political movements, and international partnerships, as well as more global views of the literary confrontation between writing and oppression.

CHAPTER 1: A SUITCASE OF ONE'S OWN:  
AMBIGUITY, OTHERNESS, AND THE LIMINAL TRANSNATIONAL WOMAN WRITER

“In fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country.”

–Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's 1938 passage in *Three Guineas* illustrates the point I would like to make about transnational writing by women. The historical exclusion of women from the patriarchal power structure of nation makes them ideal observers and agitators. Even as patriotic citizens of our birth or adopted nations, our femaleness often separates us from the aggression and violence that go into the maintenance of national sovereignty. When women, particularly women writers, travel across borders—continental, national, local, or even the threshold between home and work—we develop a basis for comparison. To travel is to exercise a liberty that women did not always have and that eludes many women still.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf famously ponders the fate of Shakespeare's hypothetical sister: a genius “as agog to see the world as he was,” but with “no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil” (Woolf, part 3). Before she is seventeen, Shakespeare's sister runs away to London. She stands at the theatre door, only to be laughed at and mocked, becomes impregnated by an actor, and ultimately takes her own life (part 3). Woolf's conclusion that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (part 1), rings as true in this generation as hers, but leaves a bitter taste; despite her money, her room, and her fruitful literary output, Woolf suffered the same ill fate as the sister she dreamt of for Shakespeare.

Writing in the 1940s, Simone de Beauvoir reconsidered women and creativity. Seeking, but not finding, the female equivalents of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, she concludes, “Art,

literature, philosophy, are attempts to found the world anew on a human liberty: that of the individual creator; to entertain such a pretention, one must first unequivocally assume the status of a being who has liberty” (*The Second Sex* 711). Beauvoir, discussing Stendhal, van Gogh, and the male Russian masters, among others, says:

The men that we call great are those who—in one way or another—have taken the weight of the world upon their shoulders; they have done better or worse, they have succeeded in re-creating it or they have gone down; but first they have assumed that enormous burden. This is what no woman has ever done, what none has ever been *able* to do. To regard the universe as one’s own, to consider oneself to blame for its faults and to glory in its progress, one must belong to the caste of the privileged. (713)

Of course, even a cursory knowledge of the Russian women poets from the first half of the twentieth-century—Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva—who bore witness to the horrors of Stalin’s purges in the Soviet Union and were as a result prosecuted and persecuted by the state—would belie Beauvoir’s argument that no woman had until that moment assumed the burden of the world; but it is worth noting that for all the horrors of Soviet life, perhaps women had some relative agency there—in the USSR they gained the right to vote in 1917, as opposed to Beauvoir’s France, where suffrage wasn’t guaranteed to women until 1944 (“Women’s Suffrage”).

These days, women writers frequently take the weight of the world upon their shoulders, and the general view is that women—at least in the West—have all the liberty and privilege that men do. Women can read, vote, own property, ride the subway alone, and perhaps write in a private nook, occasionally undisturbed. Yet, one has only to imagine the impossibility of a

female Dominique Strauss-Kahn or Bill Clinton or Silvio Berlusconi or Julian Assange to know that women's liberty and equality extends only so far and that a double standard is alive and well. With luck, women can cross borders far and wide, but even in positions of power, we are still on the margins. Running for political office, heading a company, or traveling solo across a continent—whenever women are agents of action—it is our femaleness people notice first.

Thirty years before Edward Said published *Orientalism*, Beauvoir wrote an entire treatise—*The Second Sex* on women as the Other, a concept she borrowed from Hegel's master-slave-dialectic in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*,<sup>2</sup> and then subverted, saying, "Certain passages in the argument employed by Hegel in defining the relation of the master to slave apply much better to the relation of man to woman" (Beauvoir 64). According to Beauvoir, woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to a man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xxii). Beauvoir further argues, however, that woman's position is ambiguous because "she stands before man not as a subject but as an object paradoxically [endowed] with subjectivity; she takes herself simultaneously as *self* and as *other*, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences" (718). A female author is, in other words, both artist and muse, creator and creation.

Beauvoir beautifully embodies the contradictions inherent in being a woman writer. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she probes the utter ambiguity of the human condition, concluding, "The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won" (*Ethics* 129). I bring up this

existentialist outlook because such ethics seem to impel the responsibility felt by contemporary transnational women writers to bear witness to atrocities and injustice, the kind of responsibility Beauvoir argued that great male artists possessed but women did not have the liberty to possess. Beauvoir lived the very ambiguity she described, writing of women's subjugation, but refusing, until late in her life, to call herself a feminist (Moi, *Feminist Theory* 108). Her philosophies are rarely credited for being independent of Sartre's (Mahon); her novels all but forgotten. For decades, critics, including feminists, belittled and dismissed her.<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir published *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (originally *Pour une Morale de l'Ambiguité*) in 1947, but it was Walter Benjamin who wrote, "Ambiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic at a standstill" (Bhabha 26), a quote around which Homi Bhabha centers his own seminal discussion of ambiguity in *The Location of Culture*.

My point is that Beauvoir pre-figured some key ideas in postcolonialism but was marginalized by those who omit her from the canon. Moreover, Beauvoir's personal life underscores the contradictions present in the lives of many women to this day: despite her prolific accomplishments in traditionally male domains (philosophy and literature), she reportedly suffered intensely because of Sartre's perpetual sexual infidelity, and, it is said that in personal matters she submitted to him entirely.<sup>4</sup> In her discussion in "Debating Hegel's Legacy for Contemporary Feminist Politics," Nancy Bauer argues for a return to Beauvoir and therefore Hegel, citing the "wildly contradictory lives that many young women find themselves leading." On the one hand, she says, "they are staunch post-feminists. They think that sexism is a thing of the past and there need be no limit on their ambitions for themselves. On the other hand, they are

---

<sup>3</sup> Moi discusses the condescending critical response to Beauvoir in the first chapter of *Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir*.

<sup>4</sup>I am basing this on a variety of material, including discussion at the 2011 Duke University *Simone de Beauvoir Today* symposium at Duke University, 23 September 2011.



as concerned as ever—from what I can tell perhaps *more* concerned than ever—to ensure that they are sexually pleasing to men . . . . They try to negotiate this contradiction by construing their own sexiness as a kind of social power” (238-9). In fact Beauvoir’s life and work illustrate how women writers perform the creative act of writing even as they are observed from the outside.

A woman writer is both subject and object, observer and observed. But for a transnational woman writer, the ambiguity doesn’t end there. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note that transnational literature generally refers to “literature written by people who have immigrated or in some other way travelled from a homeland; to literatures written in a second language; or to literatures with a cross-cultural theme” (Ashcroft et al. 214). Seyhan, following Appadurai, understands transnational literature as “a genre of writing that operates outside the national canon, addressing issues facing deterritorialized cultures, and speaks for those in what [she] call[s] ‘paranational’ communities and alliances” (Seyhan 10). Bhabha invokes Said when he says, “The study of world literature might be the study of the way in which cultures recognize themselves through their projections of ‘otherness’” (Bhabha 17). But let us also consider this statement in the context of Beauvoir in order to appreciate the double ambiguity surrounding a transnational woman writer. In this case, we have a Subject/ Other/ Observer producing the material through which “cultures recognize themselves through the projection of ‘otherness.’”

A transnational woman writer, gazed at for *being* a woman, gazed at for *being* a stranger in a strange land, stares unflinchingly back, “othering” the Subject, employing the language of the gazer to record what she sees. As I demonstrate, crossing borders within or outside of nation, existing outside while remaining inside at the same time, or entering a community of Others within liminal Third Space, allows the transnational woman (writer) to confront patriarchal structures that seek to silence her voice. Four contemporary transnational women writers whose

lives, works, and fictional characters challenge such patriarchal structures are Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Elif Shafak, Fadia Faqir, and Edwidge Danticat. Because of their femaleness, their transnationality, and their occupation as writers, these authors are liminal individuals whose novels depict the gross abuse of patriarchal power, and whose works include characters crossing borders, existing simultaneously both inside and outside, and forming communities in Third Space. That is not to say that a writer's transnationality is the only factor determining the transnationality of the work; to repeat Seyhan's definition, transnational literature "operates outside the national canon," addresses "issues facing deterritorialized cultures," and expresses themes of importance to "'paranational' communities and alliances" (10).

Terms like *liminal* and *marginal* that locate the Other in time, space, or ritual have almost byzantine lineages through modern and postmodernist discourse. I will not attempt to record every instance of their use, but rather present selected uses in order to then explore the ways in which they help describe how transnational writing by women can function as anti-patriarchal. Victor Turner popularized van Gennep's concept of liminality in his canonical 1974 work on symbolic anthropology, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*. Turner uses the term liminality to describe the middle phase of cultural rites of passage, during which one is "betwixt and between all fixed points of classification" (232). He says:

In liminality, *communitas* tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition. The bonds of *communitas* are anti-structural in the sense that they are undifferentiated, equalitarian, direct, extant, nonrational, existential, I-Thou . . . relationships. *Communitas* is spontaneous, immediate, concrete—it is not shaped by norms, it is not institutionalized, it is not abstract (274).

Liminality, which Bhabha adapts from Turner and makes central to postcolonial discourse as a means to celebrate the “articulation of difference,” can refer to a moment in time, a space, an object, or a person. When it refers to space, Turner’s notion of anti-structural *communitas* is key, for it is what allows resistance to patriarchy to flourish within. Fetson Kalua, who traces the etymology of *liminality* in order to relate it to African women’s identity, says:

For Turner, “the attributes of liminality or of liminal or liminoid personae (threshold people) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner 1969, 95). Thus liminality is that moment “when the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken shape” (Turner 1992, 133). While it may be a moment of restlessness, unleashed by an unknowable future, it certainly is also “an expanded and ex-centric sit of experience and empowerment” (Bhabha 2004, 6) revealed in the possibilities for dissonance and dissidence in the life of the initiate. (Kalua 24).

Kalua’s entire passage expresses the liminal qualities I find in transnational literatures by women generally, but her final point that the liminal functions as a seat of empowerment, awakening possibilities for “dissonance and dissidence” articulates my overall argument that the transnational woman writer is situated to confront patriarchy because of her liminality.

It was in researching African feminist scholarship on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* that I discovered that Obioma Nnaemeka builds on both Beauvoir and Turner to describe the liminal, marginal and “edgy” lives of African women. Nnaemeka’s essay, “From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re) Inscription of Womanhood,” drew my attention to Beauvoir’s 1966 lecture in Japan, “Women and Creativity,” which suggests that

women on the margins are best equipped to describe the battle at the center (Nnaemeka 154). In the lecture, Beauvoir says, “The privileged position is that of a person who is slightly on the side-lines: for example a war correspondent who shares some of the risks of the fighting forces, but not all, who is involved in the action, but not totally; he is best placed to describe the battle. Well, the situation of women is akin to this” (Beauvoir “Women and Creativity” 27).

Beauvoir uses the eleventh-century Japanese writer Murasaki Shikibu as an ideal example of a woman on the margins describing the battle at the center. Shikibu, who penned *The Tale of Genji*, was a royal lady-in-waiting; Beauvoir argues that it was Shikibu’s privileged position at court but on the margins of power that allowed her to observe and record such an “extraordinary picture” of court life (27). Nnaemka, the French feminist Julia Kristeva, and Toril Moi all stress the importance of the *positionality* of marginality, and its relativity. Moi points out that Kristeva, rather than positively defining “femininity,” relationally defines it as “that which is marginalized by the patriarchal symbolic order” (Moi, *Sexual* 166). She says, “What is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies” (166).

What is clear is that when Seyhan speaks of transnational literatures operating outside the national canon, and when Moi says, “Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown” (166), both scholars are pointing to the frontier of liminal space. The benefit of existing in that space is that it allows authors room to critique the “inside.” This is what Bhabha enunciates when he says, “[T]he boundary becomes the place from which *something begins*” (Bhabha 7). What begins in this space in the case of Adichie, Shafak, Danticat, Faqir, and other transnational women writers is agency, responsibility, voice, and the beginnings of resistance to oppressive patriarchal regimes.

Assuming the burden of the weight of the world—that task that Beauvoir admired in great male authors but found female authors without the liberty to accomplish—suddenly becomes imperative for the transnational woman author because there is no one else who can assume the burden the way she can, with her unique knowledge of both her own birthplace and the broader world. Moreover, being a transnational author entails developing an awareness of the potential gaps in national knowledge and delivering that understanding to others, who, entrenched in their respective cultures, may not have access to vital information, especially when it comes to recovery of the past. Seyhan says, “What are the implications and consequences of writing between national paradigms, ‘bilingually’ or ‘multilingually’? Transnational writing can potentially redress the ruptures in history and collective memory caused by the unavailability of sources, archives, and recorded narratives” (Seyhan 13).

Having no country, or at least not belonging solely to a single nation, transnational women writers have opportunities to critique both their countries of origin and their adopted lands. I won’t label all transnational women writers as “exiled” because they are not. *Liminal* and *exiled* do not mean the same thing. Some, despite the experience of Otherness, travel freely and comfortably between nations enjoying considerable privilege, whereas others, the truly exiled, can never return to their homelands. Nevertheless, Seyhan’s discussion of exiled writers as reclaimers and preservers of “cultural legacies destroyed and erased in their own countries by oppressive regimes” illuminates the possibilities open to transnational women writers. Seyhan continues, “Intellectual goods are smuggled across borders and transplanted in foreign soil. However, their reinscription often takes the form of a negotiation between the contesting and conflicting ideologies of national and ethnic minority groups in exile” (Seyhan 28).

The transnational women writers I address here bear witness in their stories: Adichie to the corruption and brutality of post-colonial Nigeria and the private nightmare of domestic abuse, Shafak to issues surrounding the Armenian Genocide, Faqir to the oppression of women in colonial Jordan, Danticat to the crimes of Duvalier and his henchmen in Haiti. Such writing is dangerous. Regimes don't like to be criticized, and the fact that some governments fear the writings of transnational women authors proves that these female authors have more power than Beauvoir accorded them. Describing her *raison d'être* for writing *The Dew Breaker*, a novel which unveils the patriarchy and gross injustices of the Duvalier dictatorships in Haiti, Edwidge Danticat says, "Create dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them" (Danticat, *Create Dangerously* 10). Although Danticat's burden is heavy, I would like to think that Beauvoir would find some satisfaction in the fact that she, and the other writers I discuss here, as well as countless others writing transnationally, have both the liberty and the inclination to carry it.

Danticat quotes Osip Mandelstam who said, "Only in Russia is poetry respected—it gets people killed" (11). Indeed my inspirations for the study of transnational women writers in confrontation with the state remain the early twentieth-century Russian poets Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva who challenged Stalin in their poetry and were censored, prosecuted, and persecuted.<sup>5</sup> Although Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva were not transnational in the sense that we think of it today, they were products of imperial Russia, existing under the totally alien regimes of the Bolsheviks and then Stalin. They were certainly betwixt and between nations, even within

---

<sup>5</sup> Persecuting writers is unfortunately a trend that continues in Russia: I am also inspired by the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was assassinated in 2006 on Vladimir Putin's birthday after painting an unflattering picture of him in her book and exposing Russian aggression in Chechnya.

Russia and the USSR. Danticat's message, that a writer should create dangerously for people who read dangerously, highlights the necessity of witnessing injustice through writing.

Akhmatova began her long poem, "Requiem," which bears witness to the Great Soviet Purges of 1936 to 1938, as follows:

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day somebody in the crowd identified me. Standing behind me was a woman, with lips blue from the cold, who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper (everyone whispered there):

"Can you describe this?"

And I said, "I can."

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face. (Akhmatova 99)

As Akhmatova witnesses Stalin's Purges for her own and subsequent generations, Danticat, Adichie, Shafak, and Faqir write to bear witness to gross abuses of power. Bearing the weight of the world on their shoulders, they unanimously answer the question, "Can you describe this?" with a resounding, "Yes!"

CHAPTER 2: CONFRONTING PATRIARCHY  
ON BORDERS AND IN THIRD SPACE

In Chapter 1, I establish the liminality of transnational women writers, “betwixt and between” geographies, national identities, subject and object, and how that liminality privileges their literary confrontations with patriarchal power structures, in what can be a very dangerous occupation. In this chapter, I am going to discuss two geographical tropes—border crossing and liminal Third Space—which function in texts by transnational women authors as states of enunciation, giving characters room to negotiate identity, question history, and begin to resist oppression.

Among postcolonial feminists, Gloria Anzaldúa is perhaps the icon of the interstitial, for her most famous work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, bilingually celebrates ambiguity, reveals the possibilities for dissonance and dissidence, and addresses liminality and border crossing overtly. She calls her experience of betweenness a “consciousness of the Borderlands”:

*Una lucha de frontera / A struggle of Borders*

Because I, a *mestiza*,

continually walk out of one culture

and into another,

because I am in all cultures at the same time,

*alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,*

*me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.*

*Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan*

*Simultáneamente. (99)*



Anzaldúa writes very intimately in a blend of English and Spanish about her experience as a lesbian Chicana living on the physical, psychological, and metaphysical borderlands between the southwestern United States and Mexico, but as often happens, it is the most personal, specific work that ultimately proves to be the most universal and transcendent. Norma E. Cantú, introducing an international seminar on Anzaldúa, suggests that it is on the border that we can find the means to challenge injustice. Cantú addresses contemporary scholars concerned with global violence against women and state sponsored human rights violations, asking, “that we be on both sides of the bridge . . . [o]n all continents at once” (2). She continues, “Anzaldúa asks that we not see the other as alien, or outside ourselves, but that we see everyone and everything as an extension of ourselves. Such a concept undergirds global Anzaldúan studies inasmuch as the very localized focus of her work—the borderlands—reverberates across other landscapes” (2).

I argue that Adichie, Shafak, Faqir, and Danticat’s works, emblematic of contemporary transnational writing by women, function in the same manner that Cantú characterizes Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The four novels I consider in this thesis—*Purple Hibiscus*, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, *Pillars of Salt*, and *The Dew Breaker*—are localized and specific in the worlds they depict; yet their characters move across borders and ask that we consider multiple points of view and perhaps that we even view others as extensions of ourselves. As to what a writer from Nigeria, a writer from Turkey, a writer from Jordan, and a writer from Haiti have in common: all three were born outside the United States or England, but later relocated to one of the two for extended periods. They each were heavily influenced by university communities, those privileged environments which on a good day function as liminal spaces that nourish new ideas. They each travel frequently, they write in English, and include

patriarchy, violent oppression, and self-representation as major themes in their work. Although these tropes are evident in the novels of all four women, in the pages that follow I will explore the significance of border crossing and Third Space in two of the works, Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and Shafak's *The Bastard of Istanbul*.

Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* chronicles the life of fifteen-year-old Kambili while probing deeper questions of corruption, domestic violence, the rift between public and private persona, and the lingering effects of colonialism on contemporary Nigeria. Set in 1990s Nigeria during and after a Hausa military coup and against a backdrop of government corruption, increasing unrest, and political killings, *Purple Hibiscus* is narrated by Kambili, the upper class daughter of Eugene, a "Big Man" factory owner and newspaper publisher whose philanthropy has earned him the title *Omelora*—"one who does for the community" (56). Eugene, who adopts a British accent when speaking English with whites and is widely admired for generosity and integrity, privately abuses his family using a strict interpretation of Catholicism to justify his acts of violence. Kambili and her brother Jaja idolize their larger-than-life father, silently accepting his punishments, his adulation of European culture, and his beatings of their pregnant mother, Mama. The siblings are forbidden from getting to know their paternal grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, who lives in relative poverty but maintains the ancestral religion.

Kambili is kept oppressed and submissive within the high walls of her father's compound where a strict schedule of duties must be attended to at all times. The only movements permitted outside the compound are to attend her equally authoritarian Catholic school and her church. Her life is circumscribed by, and she is completely at the mercy of, her father's familial dictatorship. It is the only world she knows, and because she has no other reality to contrast it against, she perceives her father's physical abuse as demonstrations of love. Adichie conveys a sense of

Kambili's imprisonment through her descriptions of the physical barriers on the border of her father's family compound, which read startlingly like the borders between nations. She says, "The compound walls, topped by coiled electric wires, were so high I could not see the cars driving by on our street" (9). The school, too, from which Kambili is retrieved daily in a limousine (50), offers no chance to escape. Adichie says, "The walls that surrounded Daughters of the Immaculate Heart Secondary School were very high, similar to our compound walls, but instead of coiled electrified wires, they were topped by jagged pieces of green glass with sharp edges jutting out" (45). The prison-esque locations function like the heavily fortified national borders preventing Kambili from observing that life can be different elsewhere. When the family does leave the compound for trips to their country house in Abba, a house with "wide black gates," Eugene requires them to recite the rosary for the length of the car ride, as if to insulate them from exposure to new geographical terrain.

The choking grip of patriarchy over Kambili's life inside the mansion could not be more literally expressed than in lines like, "I felt suffocated. The off-white walls with the framed photos of Grandfather were narrowing, bearing down on me" (7). Within the palatial house, walls form impenetrable barriers between innocence and knowledge, oppression and agency. Kambili must stay confined in her bedroom reading scripture, as per her rigidly enforced schedule, even as the thuds of her father beating her mother are audible through the walls (32). She never sees her mother beaten; her mother disappears to the hospital and returns a few days later, like a political prisoner whose unjust punishments his fellow citizens never get to see. Indeed, the entire domestic world of Eugene and his oppressed family can be read as a metaphor for the corrupt and cruel powers controlling Nigeria and repressive state patriarchies everywhere. Ogaga Okuyade notes, Adichie "explores the shades of female marginalization stemming from

patriarchy and how it relates to the experience of government's exploitation of the masses. The issues of patriarchy and political corruption and subjugation are separate, but Adichie has been able to conflate them" (Okuyade 256).

Eugene allows Kambili and her brother a brief, timed, visit to their Igbo grandfather, Papa-Nnukwu, in his tiny "thatch-enclosed compound" (63). Even his small home resembles a tiny nation, poorly fortified by a "creaking wooden gate and a verandah bounded by rusty metal bars" (63). But it is not until Kambili moves again across geographical terrain to visit her Aunt Ifeoma and cousins in the University town of Nsukka, free for the first time from her father's tyranny, but also away from the sheltered home that his wealth provides, that Kambili begins to tap on the walls of her cocoon. Although life in Nsukka is without the creature comforts of her father's house, Ifeoma and her children expose Kambili and Jaja to Igbo cultural pride and an intellectual critique of colonialism and patriarchy. Ifeoma, a strong single mother, and her daughter Amaka, at turn artsy and sarcastic, provide startling contrasts to Kambili's terrorized Mama who endures bloody trips to the hospital and violence-induced miscarriages. Okuyade remarks, "For Kambili, Nsukka does not only represent a town where her aunt lives but a symbol of liberty" (Okuyade 252). It is the movement through and across physical, psychological, and ideological borders that triggers Kambili's coming of age and the burgeoning seed of self-empowerment. In her Master's thesis on patriarchy and dissent in Achebe and Adichie, Eve Judith Eisenberg notes:

Both Kambili and Jaja are capable of combining within themselves positive. . . aspects of both modernity and tradition which they demonstrate symbolically in their travels from their father's house, a locus of internalized, self-hating imperialism, to their grandfather's village, home of revered tribal past imbricated

with male privilege, to their aunt's home in Nsukka, where they find a Westward-gazing bourgeois feminist modernity that trades the problems of male privilege for those of capitalism and the loss of cultural identity. (39)

Because not all problems, particularly ideological ones, are resolved by the end of the novel, it is important to heed Nnaemeka's caution that we "recognize not only *how* these strong characters liberate themselves but also *where* they liberate themselves into" (149). Nevertheless, it is Kambili's movement beyond the borders of the family compound and across the varying geographies within Nigeria that catalyzes her transformation from victim to young woman with agency.

The postcolonial encounter in Nsukka is the catalyst in *Purple Hibiscus*, marking the point when patriarchy starts to "fall apart," a phrase from the novel's opening line<sup>6</sup> which pays homage to Achebe's classic. Achebe's novel depicts the downfall of another violent "Big Man," Okonkwo, an Igbo man who fractures as a result of colonial impact. In *Purple Hibiscus*, it is Eugene's patriarchy—a patriarchy modeled after the colonialism just sweeping into Nigeria in *Things Fall Apart*—that begins to crumble. So in this manner, *Purple Hibiscus* not only pays homage to *Things Fall Apart*, but serves as its counterpoint. Just as Achebe brought human dimension to often one-dimensional European depictions of Nigerians, Adichie brings a transnational female Nigerian perspective to a worldwide readership.

The purple hibiscus of the novel's title refers to a new and unusual hybrid species of hibiscus, grown from a cutting that Kambili's brother, Jaja, takes from Auntie Ifeoma's garden in Nsukka and secretly brings back to Eugene's house to plant among the all-red hibiscus inside the family compound. The novel is replete with Catholic symbolism and I'll discuss the religious

---

<sup>6</sup> The complete opening line of *Purple Hibiscus*, which I will discuss more fully in the chapter on dismantling religious patriarchy, is, "Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère" (3).

implications of the red and purple hibiscus in the religion chapter, but in addition to its religious symbolism, the purple hibiscus also symbolizes how we take home with us some of the ideas we encounter on our travels, plant them, and allow them to flourish in our own worlds, transforming our environment and ourselves. While I dislike the term “hybrid” in reference to an individual’s identity and prefer to think of cultural identity as negotiated rather than as a grafted biological experiment, the literal hibiscus hybrid in *Purple Hibiscus* both pokes fun at and reinforces Bhabha’s use of the term in *The Location of Culture*. Bhabha, discussing an “in-between” temporality in Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story*, says:

This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge, which like the coloured South African subject represents a hybridity, a difference ‘within,’ a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality. And the inscription of this borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive ‘image’ at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world. (19)

In *Purple Hibiscus* the hybrid represents the global flow of ideas, the influence of cosmopolitanism in dismantling patriarchal oppression, the borderline existence of Kambili at the crossroads between patriarchal oppression and some yet-unnamed potential, and indeed the power and beauty of transnational literatures delivered to readers the world over.

Whereas in *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili’s journey across borders are within a single nation, Armanoush, one of the two main characters in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, must travel across continents on her journey of self discovery. Growing up splitting her time between her American mother’s house in Arizona and her Armenian father’s home in San Francisco, she travels to Istanbul in an attempt to find out what happened to her father’s family during the 1915 Armenian

Genocide. Through the novel, Shafak confronts a regime that denies the Genocide and Turkish culpability, and jails, and occasionally murders, its dissidents. Armanoush's journey involves crossing national borders, and the book explores the borders between the past and present, asking questions about our individual responsibility for the past. The novel also points to the power inherent in liminal spaces, and provides a model for how people from different backgrounds can acknowledge one another as individuals, especially when there is a historical conflict dividing their respective groups. Indeed by the end of the novel, the two main characters, one Turkish and one Armenian American, mirror one another, walking in "harmonized steps" (349), and perhaps even function as extensions of each other; at the very least they understand and appreciate the "Other." Considering that they are members of two groups that have for at least the last century dehumanized each other, this is a significant accomplishment.

To consider again the larger functions of transnational literature, Seyhan says, "In sharing their experiences of multiple—linguistic, geographical, historical—dislocations, the writers of the modern diaspora invite their readers to see culture not as a fundamental model but, in its interaction with other cultures" (Seyhan14-15). Seyhan also notes that writers writing "outside of nation" "express the sentiment that neither a return to the homeland left behind nor being at home in the host country is an option. They need an alternative space, a third geography" (Seyhan15). It is that Third Geography that allows room to understand the "Other" as well as to resist oppression.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha offers a humorously abstruse explanation of "Third Spaces of Enunciation" referencing a VIP list of scholars including Fanon, Spivak, Foucault, J.S. Mill, Stuart Hall, Marshall Sahlins, and Wilson Harris, to name just a few. His digressive explanation at its core simply identifies as Third Space an ambiguous space that is between

structured spaces and encompasses the same fluid, anti-structural, anti-hierarchical *communitas* that Turner described as liminal. What is useful in Bhabha's discussion are the possibilities for empowerment and potential for resistance inherent in Third Space. He says, "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (55). It is the notion that Third Space is unfixed that allows us (and fictional characters) to rearticulate the symbols of culture that makes it such a potent location in stories.

Third Space appears in the guise of two cafes in *The Bastard of Istanbul*: Café Kundera and Café Constantinopolis. Café Kundera is a brick and mortar coffee house frequented by jaded intellectuals. Café Constantinopolis is a virtual meeting place where Diaspora Armenians congregate on the Internet. The two cafes serve as sanctuaries (87) for the characters of Asya and Armanoush respectively, functioning in the text as "Third Spaces of enunciation," between fixed locations in the "real" world. For Asya, Café Kundera is a safe space which doesn't force her to conform or correct her ways, a refuge "where human beings were thought to be essentially imperfect" (87). It is in the virtual world cyber café, Café Constantinopolis, neither fully the past nor fully the present, that Armanoush makes the decision to visit Turkey on a journey of self discover and recovery of the past. During the course of the novel, each character brings the other to visit her respective café, where negotiations on history, identity, and individual and collective responsibility occur.

Nobody knows why Café Kundera on the European side of Istanbul bears Kundera's name: "there was nothing, literally *nothing*, inside the place reminiscent of either Milan Kundera or any one of his novels" (76). There are various theories circulating about the origin of the



café's name, for example that Czech novelist "stopped in for a cappuccino" or that the owner of the café was a fan of Kundera (77), but the most popular explanation was that the café was Kundera's fictional invention:

. . . [T]his spot in space was nothing but a figment of his flawed imagination. The café was a fictive place with fictive people as the regulars. Sometime ago Kundera had, as part of a new book project, started to write about this place, thus breathing life and chaos into it, but before long he had gotten distracted by far more important projects. . . . (78)

The possibility that the café is not "real" (and highlighted by the fact that it is named after an author who excelled at liminality, transnationality, and resistance) underscores its betwixt and between-ness within Istanbul. Istanbul specifically and cities generally are significant to anti-patriarchal modes of transnational writing by women because the cosmopolitanism of cities forces coexistence among vast conglomerates of diverse people who must make allowances for one another to get through daily life. Holston and Appadurai's observe that transnationalization occurs in cities and "[P]lace remains fundamental to the problems of membership in society and that cities (understood here to include their regional suburbs) are especially privileged sites for reconsidering the current renegotiations of citizenship" (Holston and Appadurai 189). Istanbul, divided into Europe and Asia by the Bosphorous River, is a liminal city, and Turkey, a liminal country, in that it functions as a bridge between Europe and the Muslim world. It is interesting in this context to consider Wang's notion that "my 'beyond' exists only in a third space where East and West are open to each other" (Wang 393). Despite his name, it is the character Shafak calls The Exceptionally Untalented Poet who most succinctly expresses the liminality of Café Kundera, its patrons, and, in fact, Istanbul itself. He says:

We are stuck between the East and the West. Between the past and the future. On the one hand there are the secular modernists, so proud of the regime they constructed, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the army and half the state on their side. On the other hand, there are the conventional traditionalists, so infatuated with the Ottoman past, you cannot breathe a critical word. They've got the general public and the remaining half of the state on their side. What is left for us? (81)

The Untalented Poet bemoans the utter ambiguity of life between Scylla and Charybdis, but in fact although it appears the café's patrons are merely wasting their days drinking coffee and waxing cynical, something more important is also taking place. Café Kundera, frequented by critics resisting the regime, functions as liminal Third Space, providing sanctuary and free terrain in which to discuss politics and debate the Turkish role in the Armenian genocide. Shafak describes a cafe interior that is truly borderless, flanked on four sides with "hundreds of frames that came in all sizes and shapes, a myriad of photographs, paintings, and sketches, so many that one could easily doubt if there were really walls behind them" (76). Each photograph was of a roadway somewhere else in the world: "Wide motorways in America, endless highways in Australia, busy autobahns in Germany, glitzy boulevards in Paris, crammed side streets in Rome, narrow paths in Machu Picchu, forgotten caravan routes in North Africa," and so on (76).

Between and between, neither here nor there, the café is a transnational portal where customers would "gaze on the chosen picture, little by little taking off to that faraway land craving to be somewhere in there, anywhere but here. The next day they could travel somewhere else" (77). The importance of Third Space is not in accomplishments or conclusions, but in

possibilities and connectivity. Wang nicely adds a bit of richness to an understanding of the fluidity of Third Space in “Self-Formation in a Creative Third Space.” She says:

This third does not reach consensus or synthesis but moves *between, beyond, and with* the dual forces simultaneously. It indicates the continual birth of a certain newness along the way in a never-ending process which is circular rather than linear. Therefore, my conception of a third space does not seek a metaphysical sense of “beyond” but a “beyond” immanent to the web of interconnections in order to keep opening up new landscapes—temporal, spatial and psychic landscapes. (Wang 390)

Transnational literature by women, like the liminal Third Spaces in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, opens up such new landscapes to readers around the world.

The second Third Space in *The Bastard of Istanbul*, Café Constantinopolis, is an online chatroom where Armanoush discusses the Armenian Genocide with other descendants of people from Istanbul, both within the Armenian diaspora and beyond. In this alternate world, Armanoush seeks to understand herself, others, and the larger world. Despite lacking a perfect metaphor to describe the relationship between various online universes, it seems reasonable to imagine the entire online world as a space that is both separate from our embodied lives in the physical world, yet increasingly intertwined in the daily lives of those of us who use the technologies. We in the physical world enter into online space and move between Internet and “real” space. The emergence of cyberspace as a landscape that is half-fiction, half fact into one which enters “disembodied” seems a manifestation of a liminal world that is “betwixt and between” science and science fiction, physical and virtual reality. Barbatis, Fegan and Hasen say

that when we interact with others online we are “simultaneously present in two different spatial environments” (“Performance”). They continue:

In one [space], we are aware of ‘being here,’ occupying a physical space in front of a computer screen. In this environment we are physically embodied in space defined by the arrangement of concrete, physical objects. Yet, by connecting with others (or an Other) who are not in this environment with us, we are also present in another space that is ‘somewhere out there, beyond the screen’ . . . .

(“Performance”)

When we enter relationships in space betwixt and between the space we occupy in the “real world,” we share experiences we wouldn’t share in the real world, strengthening our sense of *communitas*, so vital to Turner’s anti-structural conception of liminality.

When Asya brings Armanoush to Café Kundera, where Armanoush confronts Asya’s intellectual friends about the Turkish culpability for the Armenian genocide, tensions escalate, with Asya’s friends taking sides. Nevertheless, an unlikely meeting of Others takes place, and dialogue results. Likewise, Armanoush introduces Asya to the Armenian chatters in Café Constantinopolis, where they confront her about Turkish and individual responsibility. Nothing is ultimately resolved during these café visits. At the end of the day, a government still denies its crimes, leaving a diaspora population embittered. But while ultra-nationalists on both sides feed the fires of division, each protagonist of *The Bastard of Istanbul*, in the liminal realm of third space, has gotten close enough to the other’s point of view that it becomes part of who she is. Wang tells us, “What is central to the notion of the third is its potential to enable differences to mutually transform each other without reaching any final fusion” (Wang 390). This applies as well to the potential and possibilities of transnational literatures by women—as Shafak surely

comprehends. In her *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading* talk on the “Politics of Fiction,” she reminds us that “Chekhov said, ‘The solution to a problem and the correct way of posing the question are two completely separate things.’ And only the latter is an artist’s responsibility” (Shafak). Third Space offers a geographical location where there is room for an artist to “pose the questions” about patriarchy, oppression, identity, and self-representation.

CHAPTER 3: OUR FATHER WHO ART IN THE NATIONAL PALACE:  
RELIGIOUS IMAGERY, SUBVERSION, AND PATRIARCHY

When we consider patriarchy to be “social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; *broadly*: control by men of a disproportionately large share of power” (“Patriarchy”), it is clear that the world’s major religions from Christianity to Islam, reinforce patriarchal social organization. It is not only dominant religions imposed by colonialism that control through domination and supremacy of the male line, however, many ancestral religions are equally as patriarchal and have been exploited by those in power—at times exploited using anti-colonial rhetoric—to intimidate and control the masses generally, and women specifically. In the section that follows I will explore how Adichie and Danticat use religious imagery in their texts to ironize and subvert oppressive patriarchs’ use of religion to dominate and control. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie’s characters live under an extreme form of patriarchal Catholicism; in *The Dew Breaker*, the Haitian dictator “Papa Doc” Duvalier imposes a syncretism of Catholicism and ancestral Vodou to frighten and intimidate his populace into submission. Both authors use tropes of “Big Men” who deify themselves and use religion to self-aggrandize and secure their grip on power. By directing our attention to the use of religion in oppression, Adichie and Danticat participate in the dismantling of such repression. Again, I argue that it is the authors’ transnational liminality positioning them “betwixt and between” religious traditions that facilitates their insightful critiques of the patriarchal characteristics of the practice of those traditions.

*Purple Hibiscus* is a novel in four parts. The skeletal structure of the novel points to both the primacy of Catholicism in the text, and its dismantling. Parts One through Three take place in

the past, although they do not progress in chronological order. The section titles reference the Catholic feast day of Palm Sunday, the conclusion of Lent, and beginning of Holy Week in the Church calendar. Armed with the knowledge that Palm Sunday marks Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem, one can immediately spot the irony in the section title "Breaking Gods: Palm Sunday," whether the Gods being broken on that day are Igbo ancestors or the Catholic Trinity. God/Gods are destroyed on what is supposed to be Christ's most triumphant day. The hybrid Christian/Igbo title of Part Two, "Speaking with our Spirits: Before Palm Sunday," suggests that it is not one's priest, nor Jesus nor Mary spoken to, but ancestral Igbo spirits, and it is in this section of the book that Kambili discovers the non-Catholic spirituality of her grandfather Pappa-Nnukwu, a spirituality that both the Catholicism of colonialism and Kambili's father, Eugene, find sinful. In Part Three, "The Pieces of Gods: After Palm Sunday," Christ is not born again as in the Christian story that culminates on Easter with the rising of the Son of Man; the Gods (all of them) remain shattered, in pieces. Finally, following the three main sections of the book is the last brief section, "A Different Silence: the Present," a title which unlike the preceding three, does not correspond with Catholicism. The fact that this final brief section is not called an epilogue, but is given its own name minus the Catholic reference, contributes to the deconstruction of Catholicism in *Purple Hibiscus*. The Christian story is a trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) and much of Western literature mirrors that trinity by including three acts. *Purple Hibiscus* is not a trinity; it is story defiantly told in fours.

Lending support to the idea of "four" in *Purple Hibiscus*, Ogaga Okuyade notes in the essay "Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*" that as Kambili and Jaja move from physical space to physical space, their

development has a “quadrilateral dimension; their home in Enugu, school, church and Nsukka” (246).<sup>7</sup>

The opening line of *Purple Hibiscus* is, “Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja, did not go to communion and Papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the étagère” (3). Much has been made of Adichie’s overt reference to Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Although it can be read as an homage to Achebe, the line is more complex. Eisenberg reads it as a revision of Achebe (and of Yeats, who first used the phrase in his poem, “The Second Coming”) (Eisenberg 28), but there is more to it even than that, for Adichie’s opening is rife with symbolism and word play. The Roman Catholic Missal is a two-part volume containing both prayers and liturgical instructions for Church rites and ecclesiastical feasts (Thurston). Returning from a Palm Sunday service marking the beginning of Holy Week and Christ’s triumphant entry in Jerusalem, Eugene literally *throws the book* at his son (the book of rules, no less) in fury over his not participating in Communion. As the reader later discovers, Eugene’s brand of Catholicism is especially Eurocentric, endorsing the acculturation of Latin Mass and English speech over Igbo and depicting the holy figures as white. It drips with colonial influence despite the fact that the colonizers themselves have left Nigeria. Playing on its homonym “missile,” the missal Eugene flings conjures up images of a mighty power engaged in war, firing missiles and rocket propelled grenades. When the missal misses Jaja and instead breaks the figurines, figurines that recur in the story as a symbol of the family, the metaphorical missile of colonial religion imposed by force shatters the metaphorical Nigerian family. So although when read literally, Adichie’s opening line revises Achebe by placing the moment of the “things fall apart” crisis in contemporary Nigeria, multiple levels of interpretation show that

---

<sup>7</sup> In the previous section on border crossings, I have tried to show how Kambili’s movement from physical space to physical space serves as a catalyst for the resistance of oppression.



the line also encompasses a “clash” between colonialism and Nigeria that is a process continuing into the present and is enmeshed with religious belief systems and not merely secular authority. Adichie presents the character of Eugene, not just as a Nigerian “Big Man,” but as a God-like character deified by his family and society alike. He is praised, bowed before, and awarded the title, *Omelora*, “The One Who Does for the Community” (56). To return again to the first page of the novel, the reader’s next glimpse of Eugene after he throws the missal at his son on Palm Sunday, is a look back on Ash Wednesday (the day of Atonement) when, in the role of oblate, he marks a cross on the congregants’ foreheads with ash made from the previous year’s Palm Sunday palms. As Eugene presses “hard on each forehead to make a perfect cross with his ash-covered thumb,” he says, “dust and unto dust you shall return” (3). Out of Eugene’s mouth come God’s words to Adam as He casts Adam and Eve out of Eden (*King James Bible* Gen. 3.19). Furthermore, we learn early in the story that “Father Benedict usually referred to the pope, Papa, and Jesus—in that order. He used Papa to illustrate the gospels” (4). Even the priest deifies Eugene, for his progressive newspaper publishing and hefty Church donations and charity projects. Later in the text, it should be noted that Father Benedict has been aware of Eugene’s gross physical abuse against his family, and has been complicit through his silence. Eugene is the wrathful God of the *Old Testament*, rewarding generously and punishing without mercy, and in ways that only He can understand. His family buys into his self-deification, evidenced by such lines as, “[w]hen Kambili pictured heaven as a child, it was her father’s bedroom that she visualized (41).

What is important later in the story, is how Aunt Ifeoma and her children, who don’t subscribe to Eugene’s fanatical and Eurocentric version of Catholicism, quite exceptionally refuse to deify him as others do, forming a sharp contrast with everyone else Kambili has seen

interact with her father. Ifeoma is an empowered female character who tells Mama “sometimes life begins when marriage ends” (75). She is also aware of Eugene’s self-deification, and expressing her frustration with his not allowing their pagan-traditionalist father in the house, says, “*O joka!* Eugene has to stop doing God’s job. God is big enough to do his own job” (95).

Adichie ironizes Christianity through text in *Purple Hibiscus*. A recurring example is the popular Christian phrase “God is Love,” which Mama (Beatrice Achike) wears in the form of a slogan on her T-shirt. When Eugene throws the missal at Jaja, Mama kneels on the floor and picks up the pieces with her bare hands, “The words GOD IS LOVE crawled over her sagging breasts” (7). She literally crawls on her hands and knees, collecting shards of ceramic that her God-like husband has destroyed in a fit of rage, further demeaning a body already ravaged and desexualized, as evidenced by her sagging breasts. Her T-shirt is an example of dramatic irony—we know that Beatrice’s “God” is not love, not the kindness, compassion and warmth sort of love, at any rate. When Eugene beats her so badly that she goes to the hospital and miscarries, she returns home wearing the same GOD IS LOVE T-shirt (34).

The notion in the Achike family that “love” consists of controlling another through the assignment of pain is reinforced by the idea of burning. At the dinner table, Papa Eugene offers the children “love sips” of steaming tea, which Kambili desires despite the fact that they always burn her. She associates the painful burning with love, saying, “...I knew when the tea burned my tongue, it burned Papa’s love into me” (8). This idea of burning love of God figures into the narrative much later in the story when Eugene punishes Kambili for not informing him that her non-Christian grandfather was staying with them in Nsukka. He forces her to stand in the bathtub and pours scalding water from the tea kettle onto her feet, telling her, “Everything I do for you, I do for your own good” (196). We also learn that at Catholic school Eugene was punished by a

priest with the same method, for masturbating. This painful, burning, sadistic love has its origins in the colonial Catholic school and is consistent with and symbolic of an oppressive patriarchy that claims to subjugate native populations “for their own good,” to stamp out the sin, to civilize. Most appropriately, when Beatrice finally kills Eugene, it is by poisoning his hot tea, the symbol of his “paternal love” (290). In her response to why she hasn’t been able to have more children, she tells Kambili, “God works in mysterious ways,” a phrase brimming with irony because the miscarriages are fully preventable, yet they were caused by Eugene’s physical abuse. Abusing your wife so that she miscarries is no kind of love, and yet this is what Eugene’s family has come to believe is love. They have misread the control and brutality of patriarchy as love.

Feminists such as Audre Lorde and Haunani-Kay Trask argue that society, in its objectifying and hierarchal understanding of power, conflates love and subjugation, and therein rests the basic problem of inequality. In *Eros and Power*, Trask explains, “Patriarchal love, then, is also possessive and abusive, relying on personal and political domination, economic bondage, and physical threat” (87). Adichie metaphorically exposes the dominating patriarchies of both church and state through her depiction of Eugene.

The phrase, “God works in mysterious ways,” is repeated several times in the novel. Kambili makes the remark after Eugene is killed, and Jaja retorts, “Of course God does. Look what He did to his faithful servant Job, even to His own son. But have you ever wondered why? Why did He have to murder his own son so we could be saved? Why didn’t He just go ahead and save us?” (289). Here Adichie uses dialogue to deconstruct Catholic patriarchy. Given the radical outcome of the novel—that Beatrice murders her husband in order to save the family while her son sacrifices himself by pleading guilty to the crime, Adichie’s prose raises difficult questions such as whether the ends ever justify the means, whether killing one’s oppressor is ever

warranted, and whether power and love based on equality are ever possible. Although we are exploring fiction and the symbolic deconstruction of patriarchy, the work also provides an opportunity to reconsider philosophical conundrums.

To return to the story, Eugene saturates his family with Catholic text; he makes them recite the rosary during car trips (54) and novenas for Mama's forgiveness<sup>8</sup>, and the children must memorize and explicate Bible verses. Adichie gives plenty of evidence that Kambili is fully acculturated into the patriarchy of Catholicism, but tellingly, at Christmas dinner Eugene gives the family a choice about what to pray for, and Kambili prays for the Pope (61). Adichie plays with the Catholic texts in the novel, so that they take on subversive and prophetic connotations. During the beating that results in her mother's miscarriage, Kambili is in her room studying the *Bible*. She is studying James Chapter Five because her father is having her report back to the family on the biblical roots of anointing the sick. But although the end of James Chapter Five concerns anointing the sick, the chapter begins with a prophecy that could have been personally written for Eugene, and that may explain the mysterious rashes on his face and body. The verse begins: "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are motheaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days" (*King James Bible*, Jas. 5.1-3).

Adichie is adept, too, at exploring the nuances of religious patriarchy. Father Benedict, Eugene's white Eurocentric priest, and Father Amadi, the young Nigerian priest from Nsukka,

---

<sup>8</sup> Mama's infraction was daring to have morning sickness and not wanting to get out of the car to visit the priest during the weekly post-church visit. In fact she makes the visit despite her nausea, and Kambili as narrator reflecting back on the experience of saying novenas for her mother from the vantage point of the future says, "We had to get it right. I did not think, I did not even think to think, what Mama needed to be forgiven for" (36). Her crime was any thought or action that undermined the patriarchy, Eugene's and/or the Church's.

practice two different types of Catholicism. Like Eugene's, Father Benedict's brand of Catholicism is entrenched in colonialism. Mass must be sung in Latin, with Igbo only allowed as offertory "native songs." The figure of Mary in the church is blond and life-sized (4). Before her transformation, Kambili is fully entrenched in the Catholicism of her father and Father Benedict. She says, "I let my mind drift, imagining God laying out the hills of Nsukka with his wide white hands, crescent-moon shadows underneath his nails just like Father Benedict's" (131).

Father Amadi, on the other hand, is a more relaxed figure who speaks English-laced Igbo (135). From conversations the reader is privy to, we understand that he is still negotiating engagement with Catholicism. In Nsukka, Ifeoma, her children, and Father Amadi are discussing an apparition of the Virgin Mary that was said to have occurred in Aokpe. Ifeoma told Eugene she would bring the children on a pilgrimage as a ruse so that Eugene would allow the children to visit Nsukka. Obiora and Amaka with their anti-colonial education, debate the apparition, questioning why the Virgin appears more frequently in Europe than in Africa. Father Amadi counters, "I don't believe we have to go to Aokpe or anywhere else to find her. She is here, she is within us, leading us to her Son" (138).

This is a more personal brand of Catholicism than is practiced by Father Benedict and Eugene. When Eugene beats Kambili to the point of near death, the contrast between Father Benedict and Father Amadi is pronounced. Father Benedict gives extreme unction, to ensure she will go to heaven when she dies; Father Amadi spends time trying to heal her and protect her from her father through companionship and attention. But for all Father Amadi's more liberal, less oppressive brand of Catholicism, Papa-Nnukwu, Amaka and Obiora point out the repression built into the religion, and therefore Amadi's role as priest. Ultimately, Father Amadi continues the patriarchy of the Church when he requires Amaka to pick an English rather than Igbo

Confirmation name, “Because it is the way it’s done” (272). When push comes to shove, Father Amadi endorses tradition, even though it is both patriarchal and colonial. Neither does Adichie let the reader conclude that Papa-Nnukwu, who embraces traditional Igbo religion and rejects Christianity, colonialism and European influence is somehow anti-patriarchal; he is not. “Never teach them to disregard their fathers,” he tells Father Amadi when the young priest leaves to do missionary work (172). The one piece of advice the old man offers to the young man is that he should maintain the patriarchal structure governing his flock.

For all the negative readings of Catholic symbols in *Purple Hibiscus*, it should be noted that perhaps the most significant symbol in the novel—the hibiscus flower—is also one of hope and redemption. The colors red and purple are key symbols in the mythology of Christ’s Passion, and therefore the all-red hibiscus that grow at the family compound can symbolize suffering and crucifixion, whereas the single purple hibiscus cutting smuggled back from Nsukka and propagated—a hybrid of old and new, tradition and progressiveness—can be seen as the promise of rebirth and resurrection.

To turn now to Danticat’s use of religion in *The Dew Breaker* to confront patriarchy, nine interwoven short stories comprise the novel, depicting the world of an ex-*Tonton Macoute*<sup>9</sup> who has begun a new life in New York, his family, and his former victims. In my essay, “Papa’s Masks: Roles of the Father in Danticat’s *Dew Breaker*,” I write about patriarchy in the novel and throughout Haitian history, particularly under the brutal dictatorships of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude “Baby-Doc” Duvalier. The elder Duvalier was an anthropologist and an M.D. and exploited Haitians’ beliefs in both Vodou and Catholicism to aggrandize himself and control and manipulate the populace. I argue in the essay that it was by

---

<sup>9</sup> Member of Duvalier’s militia named after a mythical “bogeyman who abducted naughty children at night and put them in his knapsack” (216).

using religion that he secured his self-appointed role as familial and spiritual “father” of Haiti, rendering his power near limitless (223).

In 1964, Duvalier penned a new constitution, naming himself “president for life.” He produced and printed a booklet in which he replaces the Holy Trinity of Roman Catholicism—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost in the form of one God—with a hagiography connecting himself to the historical “fathers” of Haiti, saying “Dessalines, Toussaint, Christophe, Pétion and Estimé are five founders of the nation who are found in François Duvalier” (Conwell 224). In the title story in *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat includes Duvalier’s bastardized version of the Lord’s Prayer, which was included in the pamphlet:

Our father who art in the national palace, hallowed be thy name. Thy will be done, in the capital, as it is in the provinces. Give us this day our new Haiti and forgive us our anti-patriotic thoughts, but do not forgive those anti-patriots who spit on our country and trespass against it. Let them succumb to the weight of their own venom. And deliver them not from evil. (184-5)

In the non-fiction *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*, Danticat describes the syncretic fusion of Catholic and Vodou symbolism that permeates Haitian society. Baron Samedi, the spiritual father and Vodou patron *Iwa* associated with death and cemeteries. Danticat says, “During my childhood in Haiti, the dictator François “Papa Doc” Duvalier would dress like Baron Samedi. Donning a black hat, dark suit, and coattails, he was reminding all Haitians that he literally held the key to cemeteries and could decide at will who the next inhabitants would be” (30). She adds, “A 1963 *Life* magazine article quotes Duvalier as saying, ‘When the [Haitians] ask me, ‘Who is our Mother?’ I tell them, ‘The Virgin.’ But when they ask, ‘Who is our Father?’ then I must answer, ‘No one—you have only me’” (*After the Dance* 30).

Like Eugene, the *Omelora* patriarch of *Purple Hibiscus*, the Dew Breaker of Danticat's novel is also a regional "Big Man" functioning under a patriarchal system in which the ultimate "Big Man" is Duvalier himself. In *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat depicts a symbolic transfer of repressive, dictatorial power from father to son in a structural pattern that undergirds Haitian life and echoes a religious transfer of a divine and omniscient father to his son. In the first story, "Book of the Dead," the narrator, a young sculptor named Ka Bienaimé has gone to Florida accompanied by her father to deliver a mahogany sculpture to a famous Haitian actress. The sculpture, called "Father," articulates Ka's vision of her father when he was a political prisoner in Haiti under the Duvalier regime. Except the story that Ka knows of her father is a false one; he was not a political prisoner but a former *Tonton Macoute*, or dew breaker, Duvalier's henchman around whom the novel revolves. Ka's father disappears with the sculpture before Ka can deliver it and, we find out later, he has destroyed it by throwing it into an artificial lake (15), wielding even when he has renounced his former lifestyle, an all-consuming power over the narrator by destroying her artistic creation and exercising control over his own image.

Ka recalls that when she was a child, her father took her to the Egyptian room at the Brooklyn Museum where he expressed his admiration bordering on obsession for Egyptian art and eschatology. He tells her, "The Egyptians, they was like us" (125). He emphasizes that they, like Haitians, were ruled by foreigners. What he doesn't mention is that the Egyptian pharaohs ruled through a system of divine kingship, "promoting the belief that once they died in their human form they became Gods" (Conwell 227). Both Duvalier and the dew breaker of the novel possess characteristics of deities such as power over life and death and omnipotence. They both kill people at will. At Casernes prison, the dew breaker played games with the prisoners, "teaching them to play zo and bezik, stapling clothespins to their ears if they lost and removing



them as he let them win, convincing them that their false victories would save their lives” (198). One of his former victims says of the dew breaker, “He thought he was God” (199). Like Duvalier, who espoused an anti-colonial noiriste philosophy to promote his own self-aggrandizing interpretation of Vodou-Catholicism in which the dictator starred as both Baron Samedi and Jesus Christ, the dew breaker rationalizes his killing of a priest, believing that he is “liberating” his congregation “from a Bible that had maligned them, pegged them as slaves, and told them to obey their masters” (188).

In the final analysis. While Adichie ironizes and subverts patriarchal religion through symbol in *Purple Hibiscus*, Danticat bears witness to past injustice and issues a warning in *The Dew Breaker* about the ease with which the power-hungry can exploit a populace’s religious beliefs in order to self-aggrandize and transfer power, literally or symbolically, from father to son.

## CHAPTER 4: WRITING PAST SILENCE

A frequent refrain among Egyptians in the wake of the 2011 Revolution is that the Egyptian people, crippled by fear and silence for decades under the Mubarak regime and its brutal police force, would never again allow themselves to be silenced and their wills crushed. They had awakened, the refrain goes, as if from a deep sleep and felt empowered to shout out, resisting conditions they knew to be unjust.<sup>10</sup> As people from Tunisia to New York connect with each other and discover their voices in revolutions and global protest movements, anti-patriarchal novels by transnational women writers highlight both the necessity of and the dangers inherent in breaking out of silence and discovering one's own voice. As I show in the discussion of crossing borders and Third Space, the discovery of voice in both literature and life can occur when people move from location to location, cross thresholds between worlds, encounter different points of view, or enter liminal spaces such as online forums or real world cafés in which they can safely connect with others and process their experience. The discussion of religion in the works of transnational women writers has shown how the writers depict the insidious and oppressive grip of religious patriarchs whose forces collude to dominate and silence populations, particularly women.

Of silence and voice, *The Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature* says, "In the most general sense, voice can be defined as the reward for successfully battling oppressive systems that enforce silence, or it may represent the very means by which the battle was fought" (232). Critics of Euro-American schools of feminisms, however, point out that "no single woman's voice exists—and that minority women have often been silenced by the very movements credited with

---

<sup>10</sup> In his March 2011 *TED* talk, Wael Ghonim, the Google marketing manager who created the Facebook page calling on Egyptians to protest on 25 January 2011 says the decades of silence of the Egyptian people were caused by a "psychological barrier of fear" which they overcame during the protests in Tahrir Square. Ghonim asserts that post-revolution Egypt "is never going to be the Egypt of before the 25<sup>th</sup>" (Ghonim), meaning the Egyptian people will no longer be silenced by their government.

giving them voice. As a result, the binaries of silence and voice become ever more problematic, and women find that these terms apply both inside and outside of feminism” (Whitson 232).

Moreover, literature is replete with examples of feisty women who *do* raise their voices, but as a result are branded mad and locked away, in which cases “voice” is a punished transgression and not a reward.

Any discussion of silence and voice in this day and age would be incomplete without the backdrop of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s postcolonial question: “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In many ways, transnational women writers are the antithesis of the subaltern as they, in most cases, have the liberty to move freely from place to place, whereas when the subaltern moves, it is usually by force. Nevertheless, as we look at silence and voice in the works of transnational women writers, we must always consider who is not being given a voice and who does not have the luxury of self-expression or even self-representation. Another factor to consider is the different manifestations of silence. Silence can be imposed from the outside, self-imposed, willful, or even indifferent. Silencing a person is a form of oppression, and a person’s inability to find her voice a symptom of a sick environment. Inversely, self-imposed silence can also be used to exercise power over others, as when we give someone the “silent treatment” or when someone from whom we await an answer on an important matter withholds the response.

Linguistic barriers have traditionally prevented women living under patriarchal oppression from breaking out of externally imposed silence and blocking the rest of the world from hearing their voices when they do speak out. Here, the tools of globalization are having a positive impact: the fact that Google Translate will now roughly translate any document, newspaper, blog, or conversation and can even deliver the text via audio in seconds gives millions more women opportunity to both speak and be heard. While it will not solve the

problem of the most subaltern who do not have access to computers or who do not speak one of the fifty-eight languages Google Translate currently translates, the effect is still profound.

Because feminist literature can depict with equal aplomb marginalized characters emerging from silence or vocal characters marginalized and silenced for the infraction of speaking out, I am going to look at an example of each in the section that follows. First I will return to *Purple Hibiscus* to examine how a silenced character in a patriarchal environment begins to discover her nascent voice and sense of self, and then I will turn to Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*, in which a vocal woman in a patriarchal environment is permanently silenced.

Although written ten years before the publication of *Purple Hibiscus*, Obioma Nnaemeka's essay, "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood," is extremely helpful in contextualizing the creation of female authored literatures in Africa. Nnaemeka describes the dynamic and dominant role that women played in the creation and performance of African oral literature in which they were the disseminators of beliefs, histories and cultural ideals (138), and how that centrality was largely ignored by first generation male writers such as Achebe. Because early African authors needed knowledge of a colonizing European language to have their work disseminated, and the colonial education system privileged men, it was overwhelmingly male African writers who produced written literature. By the time significant numbers of African women writers joined the ranks of men in the second generation literature, the world had taken as "African reality," what was in fact a "constructed reality" in novels such as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (140). Africanist criticism accepted constructed phallogentric description of ritual as empirical reality, and women writers, perhaps out of deference to the decolonizing agenda of their predecessors, participated in the silencing of female characters in their own work. Furthermore, Nnaemeka says, postcolonial literature does

not merely describe a “clash” of cultures which occurred and concluded in the past, the clash generated a process of transition which endures (141). Thus African women writers begin from a position of marginality or liminality from which they must negotiate how they write about nations and identities in transition.

*Purple Hibiscus* deconstructs patriarchies as silenced characters—Kambili, Jaja, and their mother, Beatrice—begin to discover their voices and personal agency. Border crossings catalyze their transformations from voiceless to voice, in what also function as a *bildungsroman* or literary journey of self discovery. Kambili’s travels to Nsukka and exposure to her aunt Ifeoma’s family spurs her metamorphosis from silenced to voiced.<sup>11</sup> In Faqir’s *Pillars of Salt*, the main character, who has always had personal agency, is harshly and tragically silenced by the colonial and patriarchal world in which she lives. She does not have control over how she is represented, for her story is falsely presented by a traditional patriarchal storyteller. At its core the novel is about the protagonist’s incarceration in a mental institution because she refused to remain silent.

In “Changing Borders and Creating Voices,” Ogaga Okuyade notes that *Purple Hibiscus* “begins with silence and ends in silence” (Okuyade 257). At the beginning of the novel, Kambili, in the present, reflects back on the events that will unfold in the next part of the novel, narrated in the past. She observes her own past silence and the beginning of her emergence from it, saying, “I lay in bed after Mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and Mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all. Aunty Ifeoma’s little garden next to the veranda of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence” (15-16). At school, Kambili stutters, freezes when called on by her teachers, and is

---

<sup>11</sup> In *The Bastard of Istanbul* there are multiple silences: the shamed, secretive silence among Armenian Genocide survivors and their descendants about what happened to them in 1915; the silence of the Turkish state and some of its citizens on Ottoman Turkish culpability for the Genocide, demonstrated by the prohibition against even calling the event “genocide” and the repression of those who do; and, on a more personal level, the silence maintained by Asya’s mother Zeliha about the identity of Asya’s father.

too painfully shy to speak with her classmates, causing them to label her a snob (48-9). It is only when she travels to her aunt's house in Nsukka (as discussed in Chapter 2) that Kambili begins to emerge from her silence. Okuyade explains how Kambili's journey of self discovery and emergence from silence take place in Nsukka, where the changes manifest themselves in Kambili's physical body and, "for the first time her mouth performs almost all the functions associated with it. She smiles, talks, cries, laughs, jokes, and sings" (Okuyade 252). To borrow yogic terminology, it is as if Kambili's throat chakra has opened up and suddenly she can speak.

The novel's final brief section is entitled, "A Different Silence," suggesting the possibility of moving out of that silence into voice and also that not all silences are manifestations of oppression. Okuyade adeptly explains how Adichie's depiction of Kambili's emerging voice serves as a metaphor for Nigeria itself. She says, "Just as Kambili continues to search for her voice, so also Nigeria continues her search for self-definition and nationhood" (251). Okuyade argues that Adichie uses Kambili's search for voice as a larger metaphor, continuing, "Just like Kambili, Jaja and their mother, the Nigerian people continue to be subjected to silent spaces,--a phenomenon Wole Soyinka (2003) describes as the art of stealing a nation's "most precious asset—its voice" (Okuyade 251). Here, the individual growth a character may reflect a quest for nationhood.

The silence involved in oppression is not merely the forced silence of the oppressed, but the silence of those who stand by and watch. In the words of Holocaust survivor and human rights advocate, Elie Wiesel, "Silence helps the killer; never his victims" (Wiesel). Adichie implicates Father Benedict as one of those who stands by and watches injustice as it occurs but does not speak out against it. He is aware of Eugene's abuse of his family and not only does nothing to stop it, but holds Eugene up as a role model in the community.

An author clearly cognizant of the relationship between silence, voice, power, self-representation, and patriarchy, Fadia Faqir edited a collection of autobiographical essays by Arab women writers called *In the House of Silence*. Faqir reminds her readers that even the decision over what language to write in raises complex issues for the transnational woman author. In her 2004 article, “Lost in Translation” for the *Index on Censorship*, Faqir notes that “[t]he difficulty of publishing in their own countries and the problem of translation are driving more Arab writers living in the West to adopt the language of the Other” (166). This implies a certain element of subversion, not completely unlike Adichie’s use of Catholic symbolism to expose the hypocrisies of Eugene’s extreme brand of the religion in *Purple Hibiscus*. If a woman’s voice cannot be heard when she uses her native language, she is willing to use what she considers the oppressor’s language in order to give herself a voice.<sup>12</sup>

Silence and voice are major tropes in Faqir’s second novel, *Pillars of Salt*, which she underscores through the use of multiple points of view. The novel depicts the earlier life of a widowed Bedouin woman, Maha, and her roommate Um Saad, both confined to a colonial insane asylum in Jordan, as they reflect back on how they arrived at the asylum. Parts of the story are told from Maha’s point of view and others are Um Saad’s recounting of her life story to Maha. But the novel is framed by sections narrated by The Storyteller, Sami al-Adjnabi, who, invoking Allah and the prophet Muhammad sets forth a religiously fundamentalist male patriarchal point of view in which women are depicted as devils who will seduce and destroy men if they are not controlled. As Adichie shows in *Purple Hibiscus* through the sympathetic

---

<sup>12</sup> I have not had the room to discuss Danticat’s use of silence and voice. Seyhan notes that Danticat herself is criticized by some Haitians, including for not writing in French or Creole, but Seyhan counters by describing the considerable gifts Danticat bestows on her Anglophone readers. She says: “Ultimately, in Danticat’s work, all therapy is narrative therapy where the occulted memories of many cultures shimmer through in a tapestry of shared sounds and images. She unpacks for the reader shards of rite and ritual embedded in the many speech forms of the island—sounds of French and of Haitian Creole, African nature gods, voodoo magic—and translates the material of this discovery into an idiom of recovery” (Seyhan 57).

character of Father Amadi, a good man who nevertheless ultimately enforces the patriarchal traditions of the Catholic Church, Faqir also depicts “good” men, like Harb and like Maha’s father, who nevertheless perpetuate the cultural restraints on and silencing of women. Early in the story Maha loves Harb and he loves her, showing that tender, mutual love between men and women can occur even under such hostile conditions. Nevertheless, prior to their marriage, Harb invites Maha to meet him for a private rendezvous. Although she wants to meet with him, she heeds her mother’s warnings and does not go to see him. The next day, Harb goes to Maha’s father to request her hand in marriage. Despite her true love for him, Maha concludes, “Just like any other man in our tribe, he proposed to me because I said no” (16).

The sections told from Maha’s point of view evoke the reader’s sympathy for a woman who loses the man she loves to war and is threatened at every turn by her violent, misogynist brother, Daffash. But we see none of this when reading the sections of the story told by the Storyteller, who spreads debasing and apocryphal stories about Maha. The Storyteller says, for example, “I say that Maha was a shrew who used to chew the shredded flesh from mortals from sun birth to sun death” (2). The Storyteller maintains that Maha turned into a “she-demon” (27) who “bewitched” her father (3) with flashing eyes (4). He calls her a “vulture” and a “bird of prey” (29). Again and again, the Storyteller misrepresents Maha. After Maha’s brother Daffash rapes her friend Nasra, destroying the young woman’s chance for marriage and making her a pariah in the village, Maha threatens (but doesn’t harm) him. In the Storyteller’s version of events, Maha planned to kill her brother to inherit the family farm (29), which was in fact promised to Maha by her dying father.

Maha asserts her independence and her unwillingness to be subservient to her brother, a husband, or the British Empire. Her husband and true love, Harb, has been killed fighting the



British, and Daffash wishes to marry her off again for political reasons. Maha proudly proclaims, “I will get married to nobody, I will not sign any deeds, and will never cook for the English” (217). To punish her for her independence and voice, Daffash has her committed to the institution where she shares a room with Um Saad. So that they don’t disturb the other patients in the mental hospital when they sob, the women are given pills when they cry (103). The colonial doctor tells them they never stop talking and when they admit to speaking, the doctor announces he will increase the dosage of medicine (110). By the novel’s conclusion the British doctor has had both women lobotomized in a brutal metaphor for the permanent imposition of silence on marginalized women, a result of complicity between British colonialism and the patriarchal traditions and structure of local village life in Jordan. The characters are ultimately silenced, but Faqir, the transnational woman author delivering the story to readers, is not.

## WORKS CITED

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Purple Hibiscus*. New York: Anchor, 2003. Print.
- Akhmatova, Anna. "Requiem." *Poems of Akhmatova*. Trans. Stanley Kunitz. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. Print.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands: La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. Print.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. "Transnational Literatures." *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Barbatis, Gretchen, Michael Fegan, and Kenneth Hansen. "The Performance of Cyberspace: An Exploration Into Computer-Mediated Reality." *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 5.1 (1999): n.pag. *Wiley-Blackwell*. Web. 23 Mar. 2011.
- Bauer, Nancy, Kimberly Hutchings, Tuija Pulkkinen, and Alison Stone. "Debating Hegel's Legacy for Contemporary Feminist Politics." *Hegel's Philosophy and Feminist Thought: Beyond Antigone?* Eds. Kimberly Hutchings and Tuija Pulkkinen. New York: Macmillan, 2010. Print.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. 2 vols. Sarthe: Gallimard, 1949. Print.
- . *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Trans. Bernard Frechtman. New York: The Citadel Press, 1948. Print.
- . *The Second Sex*. Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York: Vintage, 1952. Print.
- . "Women and Creativity." *French Feminist Thought*. Ed. Toril Moi. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987. Print.

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Birnbaum, Robert. "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie." Interview. *The Morning News*. 23 Oct. 2006. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- Cantú, Norma E. "Doing the Work that Matters: Gloria Anzaldúa in the International Arena." *Signs* 37.1 (2011): 1-5. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- Conwell, Joan. "Papa's Masks: Roles of the Father in Danticat's *The Dew Breaker*." *Obsidian III: Literature of the African Diaspora*. 6.2-7.1 (2005): 221-239. Print.
- Danticat, Edwidge. *After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*. New York: Crown, 2002. Print.
- . *Create Dangerously: the Immigrant Artist at Work*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2010. Print.
- . *The Dew Breaker*. New York: Knopf, 2004. Print.
- Eisenberg, Eve Judith. "Descent or Dissent: Patriarchy and Genre in Adichie and Achebe." MA thesis. SUNY Binghamton, 2008. Print.
- Faqir, Fadia. "Lost in Translation." *Index on Censorship* 33.2 (2004): 166-70. Web.
- . *Pillars of Salt*. Northampton: Interlink Books, 1996. Print.
- Foucault, Michel. "Space, Power and Knowledge." *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Ed. Simon During. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Ghonim, Wael. "Inside the Egyptian Revolution." *TED Talks*. Filmed Mar 2011. Posted Mar 2011. TED Conferences, LLC. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- Holston, James and Arjun Appadurai. "Cities and Citizenship." *Public Culture* 8 (1996): 187-204. Web. 19 Sep. 2011.
- Kalua, Fetson. "Homi Bhabha's Third Space and African Identity." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 21.1 (2009): 23-32. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.

Mahon, Joseph. *Existentialism, Feminism, and Simone de Beauvoir*. London: Macmillan, 1997.

Print.

Moi, Toril, ed. *French Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987. Print.

Moi, Toril. *Feminist Theory and Simone de Beauvoir*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. Print.

---. *Sexual Textual Politics; Feminist Literary Theory*. London: Routledge, 1985. Print.

Nnaemeka, Obioma. "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re)Inscription of Womanhood." *Research in African Literatures* 25.4 (1994): 137-157. Print.

"Patriarchy." *Merriam-Webster. Merriam-Webster.com*. Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2011. Web. 09 Aug. 2011.

Okuyade, Ogaga. "Changing Borders and Creating Voices: Silence as Character in Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2.9 (2009): 245-259. Web. 25 Jul. 2010.

Reuman, Ann E. "Coming Into Play: An Interview with Gloria Anzaldúa." *MELUS* 25.2 (2000): 3-45). Web. 12 Oct. 2010.

Seyhan, Azade. *Writing Outside the Nation*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

Shafak, Elif. *The Bastard of Istanbul*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Print.

---. "The Politics of Fiction." *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading. TED Global*. Filmed Jul. 2010. TED Conferences, LLC. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.

"Simone de Beauvoir Today: A Symposium to Mark the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's Death." Duke University Center for Philosophy, Arts, and Literature. 23 Sep 2011. Symposium discussion.

- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. London: Macmillan, 1988. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- Thurston, Herbert. "Missal." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 10. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. Web. 31 Jul. 2010.
- Trask, Haunani-Kay. *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory*. Philadelphia: U Penn P, 1986. Print.
- Tuan, Yi-fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P. 1977. Print.
- Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1974. Print.
- Wang, Hongyu. "Self-Formation in a Creative Third Space." *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 26 (2007): 389-93. *Springer Science and Business Media*. Web. 19 Sep. 2011.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer." 47 Vol. *University of Wisconsin Press*, 2006. 527-545. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- Whitson, Kathy. "Silence and Voice." *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004. E-book.
- Wiesel, Elie. "Elie Wiesel And Oprah Winfrey At Auschwitz Speak About The Relevance Of The Holocaust Today." *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 2006. Web. 10 Nov. 2011.
- Wilner, Eleanor. Introduction. *Light in the Crevice Never Seen*. By Haunani-Kay Trask. Corvallis: Calyx, 1999. Print.
- "Women's Suffrage." *Wikipedia*. 4 Nov 2011. Web. 4 Nov 2011.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Parts One, Two, and Three. Essay based on papers read in 1928. Rend. into HTML by Steve Thomas. *eBooks@Adelaide*. 24 Aug 2010. Web. 10 Oct 2011.

---. *Three Guineas*. 1938. Rend, into HTML by Steve Thomas. *eBooks@Adelaide*. 24 Aug 2010. Web. 10 Oct 2011.