

BEYOND THEIR CONTROL: THE DISEMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN
MIDDLE EASTERN AND AFRICAN LITERATURE

by

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The disempowerment of women involves factors that influence every aspect of their lives, birthing deep oppression, victimization, and sometimes violence. Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* explores two Muslim women whose victimization occurs in contrasting situations but with similar results. It is their newfound friendship that brings hope to their oppression. *Dreams of Trespass* by Fatima Mernissi lifts the veil on an often stereotyped religion by articulating the thoughts and exposing the lives of Muslim women living in a harem. With the encouragement of her mother, Fatima determines to overcome all odds. Colonization's impact is evident in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. Tambu longs to take full advantage of an education offered to her by her assimilated uncle. Her cousin Nyasha, in contrast, remains confused and suffocated by her hybridity. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie portrays disempowerment to the extreme through young Kambili as she struggles to discover her own identity under the weight of colonial mimicry in *Purple Hibiscus*. Surprisingly, being allowed to spend time with her aunt becomes Kambili's saving grace. The thesis concludes by exploring the notion that all women have a story to share, and it is through each story that empowerment is made possible.

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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to the precious little boy who has sacrificed much while patiently waiting for this moment. Thank you, Nathan, for your rejuvenating hugs and kisses that helped me write one more page and read just one more chapter. I hope that learning will always be important to you, remaining thankful for the ability and opportunities you have to excel.

I can clearly see the smile of my daddy who passed away during my time in graduate school. I always knew that your pride in me outweighed all of my imperfections. In memory of you, Daddy, I also dedicate this thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

Women all over the world struggle every minute with a culture or religion that imparts its harsh realities on them. There are those bound by patriarchy to the point that any rebellion will result in death. Many are also overpowered by men who are only mimicking what colonization has shown them. Their lives are unsecured and oppressed. They live voiceless yet still with a tinge of hope that liberation will come to their rescue as a result of their perseverance and determination.

The following chapters will focus on the brilliant works of four different female authors whose works exemplify this reality of female disempowerment and victimization. Their stories do more than just relay an account of struggle and oppression. They extend to every person, particularly women, who have been dealt some type of injustice during any season in their lives. Hopefully there lies within each human being a moral imagination that invites them to empathize with each woman discussed, whether fictional or not. The texts chosen serve as more than just a discussion but a way for all readers to experience victimization through an untainted and fresh lens. None of the characters discussed are searching for a solution to their oppression, but relief in various forms is at the heart of their sanity.

Fadia Faqir's fictional *Pillars of Salt* (1996) draws sympathy from its readers as two Muslim women are forced into a mental institution by their respective oppressors. Their stories may vary, but their heartbreak and anger is shared. Fatima Mernissi provides a personal account of disempowerment in her narrative *Dreams of Trespass* (1994). Influenced by various women in her life, young Fatima is inquisitive of her harem walls and how they symbolize her own personal entrapment. The impact of education introduced by colonization is contrasted in Tsitsi Dangarembga's fictional novel entitled *Nervous Conditions* (1988). Young Tambu admits to

being happy after her brother dies because this affords her an opportunity for education and ultimately liberation from her homestead. Her cousin Nyasha, on the other hand, is a product of assimilation and lives voiceless under the domination of a powerful, educated father.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) portrays yet another young, fictional victim of disempowerment as she constantly strives to please her father, who has mimicked colonization to the point of being mentally and physically abusive to his family. It is the courage of his sister, and, surprisingly, her own mother, that builds confidence in Kambili, allowing her to ultimately triumph over her fears and oppression.

Bronwyn Fredericks addresses female disempowerment in a much underrepresented group in "Reempowering Ourselves: Australian Aboriginal Women." But what can be gleaned through her article is that the struggles and solutions of aboriginal women are mirrored in women on a global scale. Frederick states, "Through a process of commemorating and remembering the past...women have been reconstructing a useful legacy for the present. The telling of our stories provides a sense of our individual and collective experiences in naming of all that was and is and all that has been distorted, erased and altered to suit the needs of the colonizer" (548). For a female her colonizer represents more than just a white man who has stripped her of her culture and religion. Her colonization is equally about an oppressed and unfulfilling life that she is forced to live as a result of a person or a belief that defines her as an inferior. The stories of the women shared in the following chapters, though most of them fictional, are more than just stories in a book. They are every woman who refuses an arranged marriage, every woman who has to sleep on the floor, every woman who determines to be educated regardless of the cost, and every woman who chances a new perspective behind her oppressor's back. Disempowerment is not prejudice and comes in no particular form, but it is a reality for women, and it can be overcome.

CHAPTER ONE: PILLARS OF SALT

A desire to resist oppression is implanted in the nature of man.

Tacitus

Author and critic Fadia Faqir passionately explores the lives of two fictional Muslim women as they struggle with their individual oppressions. The text is set in Jordan during and after the British Mandate, which ended in 1948. This mandate allowed Britain to rule Palestine following World War I because it did not have an established government. Part of Palestine became a home for the Jews, and the mandate provided economic benefits for the British. Amidst this political ambiguity lays the struggles faced by the two main characters. *Pillars of Salt* illustrates the horrific and cruel behaviors against women locked in a male-privileged society. Through her articles and novels, Faqir has become a bold voice for women in Jordan. In her article “Engendering Democracy and Islam in the Arab World,” that same voice resonates a clear assurance of the promotion of gender equality. Faqir, quoting Julia I. Suryakusuma, asserts, “Women's liberation, equality and democracy are intimately connected. ‘Both have in common a concern with emancipation, freedom (personal and civic), human rights, integrity, dignity, equality, autonomy, power-sharing, liberation [and] pluralism’” (165). Each concern listed is exactly what the women in *Pillars of Salt* yearn for as they trudge through life. At the end of her fight, Maha, the main character, concludes, “[i]t was better to be shot between the eyes than see the orchard withering away” (Fadia, *Pillars* 215). Through her roommate at the Fuhais Mental Hospital, she soon finds water for her withering orchard. Her pain and oppression are mirrored in Um Saad, and her strength to survive is revived through her own memories and Um Saad’s endless stories.

Patriarchy Without a Price

Maha's brother Daffash is ultimately to blame for her fate and disempowerment, which is heavily influenced by his culture and Islamic beliefs. In "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory," Teresa L. Ebert asserts, "Patriarchy is the organization and division of all practices and signification in culture in terms of gender and the privileging of one gender over the other, giving males control over female sexuality, fertility, and labor" (19). It is interesting that Ebert uses the phrase "giving control" because such wording proves that a patriarchy is a form of disempowerment that can be prevented. This act of giving control is even evident in Maha's own family, explaining Daffash's behaviors. During her wedding preparations, Maha fondly reminisces about her mother. She shares, "Her gentle touch on my plaits used to wipe out the pain of Daffash's slaps. 'What do you expect? He is a boy. Allah placed him a step higher. We must accept Allah's verdict,' she used to say" (Faqir, *Pillars* 33). Daffash is expected to control and abuse simply because of his gender; he is fully aware that this expectation would never produce any negative consequences for him. His family, his culture, his religion, whatever the culprit, allows or even invites the patriarchy in Maha's world.

The most climactic example of Maha's disempowerment results in a rage. Upon Samir Pasha's request, she willingly goes to his house to assist his cook, but what she does not know is that she is cooking for the English, the same men who killed her husband Harb. Angry at the English and ashamed that she cooked for them, Maha responds to her disempowerment in a way that infuriates Daffash. She spits in an English officer's face, calls them "[f]oreign killers," and walks home. Obviously embarrassed by her control of the situation, Daffash must reverse the control through violence and even curses his own parents in the process, telling Maha that she is "only a woman" (Faqir, *Pillars* 162, 173). Maha's rage should be expected, yet Daffash's

retaliation, because he is male and literally given permission to behave accordingly, could not be prevented. In “Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence Against Women,” Gwen Hunnicutt discusses the idea that constructing a patriarchy involves violence against women. She states, “Given that feminist scholars see gender as the primary mechanism of difference and that violence is patterned along gender lines, theorizing should be by examining the gender social orders” (556). Daffash has always been told by his culture, religion, and family that men are superior, so Maha is not caught unawares when he seeks revenge against her.

Because of the male-dominated society that Maha inhabits, it comes as no surprise that “victimization falls along gendered lines. Not only are levels of violent victimization different for males and females, but the *context* in which violence plays out tends to differ for males and females as well” (Hunnicutt 557). Daffash arrives the next morning and kicks Maha in the face, knocking out two of her teeth with her father watching. Sheikh Nimer tries to use his seniority by raising his stick to stop the fight, but Daffash just breaks the stick. Daffash’s rant only gets worse as he beats her with his ammunition belt. Maha can be justified in her anger at Samir Pasha’s, yet her ability to embarrass Daffash gives him another opportunity to violently mistreat her. As the unwritten rules of patriarchy go, Sheikh Nimer finds no reason to rebuke Daffash. Maha says, “My father begged him to stay under his roof. ‘Maha will never repeat what she did again. Maha has repented. You are the master of the house. No one will disobey you’” (Faqr, *Pillars* 175). Daffash is literally encouraged to claim his “right” as the head of his house as his situations, once again, invite patriarchy, which begets struggle and oppression for all who do not submit to his expectations. Daffash, regardless of his father’s authority, determines to control. In his brazenness he believes he is the exception to every rule in terms of culture and respect, making it his goal to mimic colonization within his family as a way to prevent colonization from

controlling him. If he can join the victimizer's quest, he is protected from becoming a victim himself. As a result Daffash serves as Maha's very determined nemesis who makes it his life's purpose to transform cultural patriarchy and assert his own form of it.

Muddling Religion

Maha's constant struggles weaken her belief that Allah will heed her prayers or even maintain His love for her, a clear reflection of her personal disempowerment. As Harb gallops away for, what is unbeknownst to Maha, the last time, she prays for protection over Harb: "Go. May the eye of Allah guard you. Go. May Allah break the spears of your enemies' I ran behind Harb's galloping stallion, invoking Allah, His angels, His books, and His prophets to protect my man" (Faqir, *Pillars* 84). Maha seems confident with her faith in a Higher Being, but then as the ordeals continue, her faith begins to wane. "I hoped that the ears of the sky would not be deaf" (Faqir, *Pillars* 84).

A few days before Daffash's final defeat of Maha comes another instance of her faithlessness, but this time she speaks as if Allah is not interested in her oppression. As advised by Aunt Tamam, Maha will run into the mountains upon Sheikh Talib's marriage proposal in hopes that she can return when the men's anger from her rejection calms. Until then Mubarak is to stay with his grandmother. After Maha kisses her son goodbye and releases him to the care of her mother-in-law, Maha pleads with Allah, "If You are up there, watching with eyes full of boredom, please protect my son" (Faqir, *Pillars* 210). Her male-privileged society leads her to feel that Allah could not possibly take delight in her as a human being and a woman by paying any attention to her prayers.

Determined to overcome the constraints of her oppressor and gain power over her circumstances, Maha makes the decision to prematurely return to her village from the mountains.

She wonders, “What was I, Maha, daughter of Maliha, daughter of Sabha, doing there? How could I leave my son and house? I must fight Daffash. Slowly, slowly, I turned round [to Nasra] and said in a determined voice, ‘I am going back to the village’” (Faqir, *Pillars* 215).

Unfortunately, disempowerment is too powerful to overpower, and patriarchy will use religion to bring final defeat upon Maha as soon as she returns from the mountains. In “Islam and the Theology of Power,” Khaled Abou El Fadl asserts that “[t]he Qur'anic prescriptions simply call upon Muslims to fight in the way of God, establish justice and refrain from exceeding the limits of justice in fighting their enemies” (29). In Maha’s case that would apparently be the men, for Imam Rajab is yet another person in Daffash’s life who gives him permission to be violent. Determined to assert her power, Maha informs Daffash that she “will get married to nobody, [she] will not sign any deeds [to her land], and will never cook for the English” (Faqir, *Pillars* 215). A woman’s aggressiveness and boldness are signs of empowerment, and the Qasim men refuse to let that happen. “Imam Rajab winked at Daffash and reminded him, ‘Allah said in his Wise Book, “Beat them up.”’” (Faqir, *Pillars* 217). And that is exactly what Daffash does, leaving Mubarak motherless and Maha in an insane asylum.

Fadia Faqir discusses the strides Islamic women in Jordan are making in terms of politics, a male-dominated arena. She writes, “Tujan Faisal, one of the female candidates in the 1989 and 1993 elections, said, ‘It is not legislation that discriminates against us, but social backwardness’” (“Engendering” 166). It is this exact same “social backwardness” that Daffash perpetrates, forcing disempowerment on Maha. The article proves that some Jordanian women are unafraid to bring cultural and traditional inequalities to the surface of current Jordanian politics. In light of emerging transformations, Faqir asserts:

What women candidates were calling for was equality in practice, with the meaning of democracy being widened to include 'domestic inequality, identity, control over sexuality, challenge to cultural representation 'In other words, it implies bridging the gap between the public and private spheres by making the position of women a more explicit public concern. Indeed this gap continues to plague women living across the globe. ("Engendering" 166)

A gap and place of oppression common to women is the topic of religion, for it is clear in *Pillars of Salt* that Maha's fate is determined by religious inaccuracies. As Faqir notes, "Tujan Faisal called for reforming Islam as a liberal Muslim. She argued from within the traditions and as a believer. Her knowledge of the *Hadith* and the Qur'an enabled her to question male interpretations of the scriptures and the politicization of Islam. She argued that some interpretations are an insult to Islam" ("Engendering" 168).

Imam Rajab's wink at Daffash, which furtively gives Daffash permission to attack Maha, is extremely deplorable to and misrepresentative of the Islamic faith. But the reaction of the men in the village, or the lack of reaction, is as equally deplorable. As Daffash is brutally beating Maha and other women are attempting to protect her, "[t]he men stood under the palm trees watching, scratching their heads, stroking their beards, twisting their moustaches" (Faqir, *Pillars* 217-8). The Qasim men seem to be responding the only way they know how: based on a misinterpretation of their Islamic beliefs. In "Mohammed and the Islam of the Koran," author Crawford H. Toy asserts, "If we call in tradition to supplement the Koran, we find that this is an uncertain guide. The earliest Moslem biographers of Mohammed wrote long after his death, and the character of their works (in the form in which they have come down to us) is not such as to strengthen our confidence in the exactness of their information" (474-5). The men in Maha's life

are following a pattern of disempowerment passed down to them by their fathers. Unfortunately, it will be these same erroneous beliefs that Mubarak will be raised to follow. In her attempt to break the cycle of inaccurate beliefs and horrid traditions, Maha finds herself deeper in the pit of patriarchy and disempowerment, struggling not only with her own people, but also from external sources such as religion.

Misconstruing Religion Results in a Chaotic Culture

Produced from the alleged teachings of Mohammed is a culture of degradation and oppression of women in Maha's village. Of her initial encounter with Daffash upon her return from the mountains, Maha narrates:

“First of all,” Daffash barked at the top of his voice, “I don't talk to women. No brain and no faith.” The imam nodded his head approvingly. “Second, what is the use of talking to crazy women?” The men laughed in unison. Like the cracked voice of the raven of parting, their laughter soared in the blind valley. “Third, lower your head or I will shoot you between the eyes.” (Faqir, *Pillars* 217)

Daffash cannot and should not be solely responsible for Maha's disempowerment; Daffash is obviously supported in his quest to demean and control. Susan Wendell clearly defines the purposes and characteristics of an oppressor in her article entitled “Oppression and Victimization: Choice and Responsibility.” She states, “An oppressor imposes unjust constraints on the freedom of individuals or groups and/or inflicts unjust suffering on them” (23). It has already been established that Daffash brings traumatizing suffering on Maha as she strives to find a place of independence and liberation amidst a male-privileged society. Wendell takes the idea of an oppressor to another level. She asserts, “‘The oppressor’ in a situation is not necessarily an individual person. Sometimes it is a group of people, or a system of organization,

or even an abstraction, such as the concept of a cruel and vengeful God who must be appeased” (23-4). Maha is plagued by a group of people who live under a warped religion that has overtaken their culture to the extent of causing the superior group to make decisions as if they are a Higher Being. Her disempowerment is executed by one man but supported by the majority who has misinterpreted their place in society. The result is female oppression and struggle. The Qasim men exert this unnecessary power in a violent manner so as to maintain control over a group who is, in reality, no less than themselves.

Though Faqir places the other men in the village in the background as supporters of Daffash’s behavior, his role as the oppressor is definitely a staple within the Qasim culture. He obviously does not respect any aspect of a woman and uses their sexuality to his advantage. One of the first instances where Maha mentions Daffash she says this: “The women who loved my brother Daffash, who sneaked out stealthily in the middle of the night to meet him, were fools. Stupid idiots who risked honor for love” (Faqir, *Pillars* 10). This statement and the incidents to follow prove that a woman’s sexuality is at the heart of their reputation.

Power over Purity

Once again Daffash throws around his power as a man, and, once again, he is not held accountable for it. In a report entitled “Sexual and Bodily Rights as Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa,” Liz Ercevik Amado asserts that “[t]he combination of law, social practices, traditions, religious and cultural constructs intertwines to shape the concept of sexuality. The patriarchal notion that women's bodies and sexuality belong not to themselves, but to their families and society, is reflected not only in customary practices, but is also sanctioned by the penal and civil codes in all of the countries in the region” (125). Daffash embodies this exact concept of claiming a woman’s body as his own property with Nasra’s and Salih’s wives.

After he rapes Nasra, Sheikh Nimer's attempt to correct him is almost as appalling as the actual rape. "He said to Daffash, 'If you ever come near this woman again.' Daffash said, 'I am sorry, father.' [Maha's] father rubbed Nasra's back and said, 'And you should not have tempted him'" (Faqir, *Pillars* 13). Sheikh Nimer can be commended for reprimanding Daffash, but his beliefs counteract his reprimand when he also scolds Nasra. Sheikh Nimer insinuates that she is ultimately to be blamed for the incident, as her body acts as an instigator in the rape. The paradox of her needing to control something her culture will not allow her to have control over finds her little mercy and leaves her shamed.

Since a woman's body is not considered her own in some areas of the Middle East, Faqir portrays the notion that rape is not treated seriously enough to punish the victimizer, leaving the victim a hopeless outcast among her own people. Amado supports this by stating, "Most countries still classify rape and other forms of sexual assault as crimes against 'public decency and family order', echoing the traditional belief that a woman's body belongs not to herself, but rather to her father, husband or society" (126). So it comes as no surprise that Daffash strikes again but with a married woman this time. Maha hears "Daffash's careless laughter" and reprimands his behavior of raping Salih's wife. Daffash says, "It was not rape. She was begging me for it and my manhood did not allow me to let her go without giving her what she asked for" (Faqir, *Pillars* 67). His use of the word "manhood" indicates that he uses his penis to define his "maturity." He totally disregards how a woman should be valued in the eyes of her society and aims to fulfill his selfish pleasures. As Amado states, "[S]exual autonomy and bodily rights lie at the core of women's human rights, and notions of equality and empowerment cannot be applied to daily life unless sexual and bodily rights are fully realized" (128). Daffash is well aware that there is power through sexuality as he blazes a trail to intentionally destroy the purity of women.

The Consequences and Constraints of Colonization

It has been established that Daffash was not born with the passion to victimize and control, leaving yet another major contributor, apart from his culture, family, or religion, for his decision to disempower. The reality of victimization dates back to the cruel days of the colonization of culture and land and the white man's quest for power and wealth. The maltreatment imposed by the colonizer onto the colonized created a stigma that the victim would bear for centuries to come. In his book entitled *Situating Caribbean Literature and Criticism in Multicultural and Postcolonial Studies*, Seodial Frank H. Deena provides a general framework of colonization's motives and effects. Deena asserts that the colonizers "would rule with force and strength because homogeneity strengthens [their] 'self-confidence and self-sufficiency,' and as a result . . . they are protected from the dangers of losing their sense of identity through submergence, assimilation, and influence" (18). The intention of the superior group is to validate their authority through the forced submission of the inferior. "Colonial essentializing, therefore, laid the foundation for . . . stereotyping the colonized as lazy, weak, 'wicked, backward,' 'evil, thievish,' 'sadistic,' irresponsible, extravagant, and 'incompatible with one another'" (Deena 18). The victim is left labeled and destined for failure.

Daffash's role in the text serves as a cause and effect concept: the oppression of colonization results in his disempowerment of women as a way of preventing his own victimization. On the day of Maha's wedding, one of the blonde British women tells Daffash, "'You are an open-minded Arab. Not many of them around.' He twisted his thin moustache with his thumb and forefinger and whispered, 'We just want your approval and acceptance!'" (Faqir, *Pillars* 41). Throughout the novel Daffash experiences a condition Frantz Fanon mentions in his text *Black Skins White Masks*: the "turn white or disappear" syndrome (100). Daffash chooses to

“turn white” by siding with the British oppressor in order to cure his feelings of insignificance. As a result he uses that power to get what he wants, pointedly illustrated upon the text’s initial introduction of him through his raping of Nasra. But Maha proves determined to prevent Daffash’s attempt to control, even on behalf of her friend, and charges for him, rifle in hand. Nasra’s rape does not inflict or even confirm any level of fear in Maha but encourages her to strengthen her guard and determination against her victor. Motherless and secure, Maha illustrates a statement made in Ernest J. Wilson’s article entitled “Orientalism: A Black Perspective.” He states, “One of the characteristics of being dominated is that the daily struggle to survive is so terribly demanding that one has time for little else” (60-61). Maha has a choice to literally spend her days looking back to avoid her oppressor, which is her own brother, or fight to overcome him. She chooses the latter.

Maha is burdened with the weight of double disempowerment as the colonizer’s behaviors seep into her brother, but she defies all intentions of both oppressors, intentions that aim to completely manipulate and destroy her. Maha’s thirst for empowerment proves that her self-significance seems only to fortify under the weight of all the disempowerment she faces. She is certain that “[t]he English tried to change our lives and our land, but failed. Occupation was like a thin cloud, which was blown away by the wind” (Faqr, *Pillars* 195). What Maha is intended to endure by the dominator is discussed in relation to African Americans in Jerome H. Schiele’s article “Cultural Oppression and the High-Risk Status of African Americans.” He claims, “Perhaps the most important and comprehensive consequence of cultural oppression for African Americans is the risk of being unaware and unappreciative of their ancestral homeland and its customs, traditions, and contributions. This risk can engender a form of alienation from one’s traditional cultural values and worldviews, a kind of cultural estrangement” (804-5). In

Pillars of Salt such cultural oppression is intended to alienate Maha, courtesy of Daffash; she even risks cultural estrangement when she marries Harb. Maha has no other choice but to leave her homestead and father behind in order to follow cultural protocol, but upon her return after Harb's death, the strain her absence has imposed is apparent. Maha strives to rejuvenate her homestead and care for her even feeble father while domination heightens as her brother Daffash throws around the weight of his connection with the British. After Harb's death, Maha's struggle to survive elevates and leaves her refusing, more than ever, to fall victim to any form of oppression. Even of the Qasim women she says, "All their lives, they sweat and dig the soil to build nests for their men and children and at the end they die and are forgotten" (Faqir, *Pillars* 145). Maha determines not to be this kind of woman yet unintentionally finds herself working for the British, the very men who killed her husband, and the rage occurs. She has experienced love with her husband, refreshment in her orange trees, and life through her son Mubarak, yet with the influence of the British, Daffash continues to mock any personal significance Maha dares to find within herself.

Finding Solace and Salvation in Nature

Sheikh Nimer discerns Maha's need for the land and its bounty, refusing to allow tradition and culture to dictate what is best for her. In reference to her father, Maha admits, "Since I had become a woman, he did not want me to work in the field because it was exhausting and shameful. A woman's place was in a well-closed room. Yet he did not want me to stop working in the field either, because I was the only one who took care of the young groves" (Faqir, *Pillars* 20). Maha is his stability, thus all the more reason for him to override tradition and pass the land to her after his death. Sheikh Nimer, without reservation, admits his awareness of Daffash's unorthodox lifestyle and tells Maha, "I always wanted to be strong and protect you,

but Allah wrote something else. The land must go to its ploughman. No, ploughwoman! The land is yours, Maha. This is my will. I have said it in front of the imam and Raai. Daffash does not deserve one span of it. It belongs to your son after you. They have witnessed my will” (Faqir, *Pillars* 180). The land is so symbolic of Maha that it strengthens and falters during each step of her journey. Even at the novel’s start, Maha prepares the reader for her story and admits that she “became an open land where every shepherd could graze his sheep, where every nurse could stick her needles” (5). The correlation between Maha’s struggle to overcome disempowerment and her fate as a patient in the institution is evident in this statement, but the figurative language used illustrates Maha’s connection with nature and the journey her fields and trees take with her.

At the start of the text, Maha spends the night debating over whether or not to meet Harb, knowing that her mother would disapprove. Maha spends the morning doubting her final decision to stay home. Sheikh Nimer realizes that home is not where his daughter can find calm in her storm and is aware that she “should be in the field . . . [her] radishes will be thirsty” (Faqir, *Pillars* 15). It is in her toiling that she definitely finds peace:

To get down to the orange groves, I had to cross the old canal and walk on mud. It was always the same, the same serenity which filtered into my soul as I set to work. I touched every tree, cleared the bed of weeds, and pushed the sluice open, letting the canal water in. The soil that morning responded to my pick and fork as if it knew how sad I was. I dug the ground, and dug to find the roots of my pain and uproot it with my hands. (Faqir, *Pillars* 15)

With no mother to share her troubles, the daughter of Maliha allows the labor in her fields to serve as a place of solitude where nature can empathize with her pain and where answers can be found.

The destruction and disempowerment Maha's brother will bring to her life and her resulting frustration is foreshadowed through his inability to appreciate her toil on the land. As everyone prepares for Maha's wedding, Daffash arrives and immediately dampens Maha's spirits. Maha observes, "Through the bluish smoke I made out a Land Rover approaching our field. It stopped in the bed planted with radishes and henna. Struck with anger, I ran towards the vehicle waving my fists 'Oh! my radishes and henna' Damn Daffash and his city friends" (Faqir, *Pillars* 33). It is these city friends who influence Daffash's dominating behavior, and it is Daffash who forces Maha to her lowest point. But Maha determines to protect her field, just as she does herself, from Daffash, building a fence around her field to prevent further catastrophes.

Heartbroken and discouraged, Maha makes the wise decision to return to her father after Harb's death. Living under the weight of her reputation as a motherless widow, Maha looks to nature for complete solace upon her return and admits, "To see the sick oranges, talk to them, even sing to them while digging the ground underneath, helped me forget everything. Forget the village which was captured between the sea, the river, and the mountains, and the aging house and the merciless tongues which never seem to tire of eating the raw flesh of people" (Faqir, *Pillars* 133). Her absence has left her trees withered and her harvest barren, but soon, due to the work of her hands, all would be revived, paving the way for the birth of her child. It is nature's maternal comfort that guides Maha through his birth. She shares, "When I placed my head on the freshly turned soil the smell of wet fertile lands filled my nostrils. I lay on my back to get rid of the uncomfortable tides of pain. The twittering of sparrows and the sound of running water mingled in my head. It was cool and damp under the lemon tree. I dug my fingers in the ground and smiled" (Faqir, *Pillars* 136). Though outside and under a lemon tree, Maha is in a place

where ultimate peace and comfort will aid in bringing her Mubarak into the world, a place as close to her mother's arms as she can hope for.

At the end of the novel, in her darkest moment in the mountains, away from Mubarak and the comfort of her homeland, Maha turns to nature again as her saving grace, as her compass to guide her to what is right. She states:

My orchard, the gem hanging on the valley's forehead. The golden dawn gently fingered the citrus trees and lifted them up, up to the sky, and suspended them there The scent of the blossoms carried me smoothly to another world. The cloud of perfume filled the valley. The clear water ran to the depth of my heart, wiped my tired soul clean, and left me fragile, transparent. Shielding my eyes, I looked at the sun. What was I . . . doing there? How could I leave my son and my house? I must fight Daffash. (Faqr, *Pillars* 214-5)

This decision, inspired by her counselor, leads Maha to her inevitable destiny. Fighting is what has always defined her life, and Maha knows that is her only source of empowerment. She states, "My fingernails were lined with soil, with dung and mud. I had dug, cleaned, uprooted. My brother's hands were clean, were never plunged into mud. The land was mine. It was better to be shot between the eyes than see the orchard withering away" (Faqr, *Pillars* 215). Maha's orange groves, radishes, henna, and canal have always felt her pains and rejoiced in her happiness but will now inevitably die with her spirit.

Um Saad: Destined for Disempowerment

Maha is not alone in her struggle against disempowerment, for she shares a room and experiences in the mental hospital with Haniyyeh, better known as Um Saad. Unlike Maha, Um Saad falls victim to an arranged marriage with a man who treats her more like a slave than a

wife. Though Abu Saad does not physically abuse his wife, the mental abuse Um Saad is forced to endure leaves her just as broken as Maha. Um Saad is very aware of her male-dominated society and, as she looks at her naked body in the mirror prior to her institutionalization, admits, “I had never had a day of real happiness. Just my sons and their beaming faces. For Abu Saad, I had been and always would be a container into which he could get rid of his frustration. For Abu Saad, I had been and always would be a slave girl I sat on the bedside and cried” (Faqir, *Pillars* 151).

In her marriage Um Saad becomes defined by a different type of violence, one that cannot be seen by outsiders, forcing the victim to wage an internal war. In “Intrafamily Femicide in Defence of Honour: the Case of Jordan,” Fadia Faqir asserts that “violence takes many cultural forms” (66) and believes that “[t]he use of violence to maintain privilege turned gradually into ‘the systematic and global destruction of women’, or femicide with the institutionalisation of patriarchy over the centuries” (65). Faqir does not elaborate on Abu Saad’s background in *Pillars of Salt*, leaving the reader to hypothesize as to why he would aim to disempower. Abu Saad tells Maha, “I think my husband stopped being rough with me because of my voice. He felt that Allah had compensated him for his thin, trembling vocal chords” (Faqir, *Pillars* 122). This leads us to believe that Abu Saad is a man with insecurities. Though neither husband nor wife is from an honorable social class, Abu Saad determines to demean Um Saad without even laying a finger on her.

From the moment she was born, Um Saad was doomed to be an outcast simply because of her gender. The notion that the men are in control of society is a concept some Muslim women view as the norm. As a child Um Saad was referred to by her own mother as “broken-neck.” Concerning her mother, Um Saad admits to Maha, “She said she had always wanted my

neck to be broken because I, the first born, was a girl and not the boy she had longed for” (Faqir, *Pillars* 95). Her foreshadowed future does not stop there.

During yet another late night, with Maha’s limited strength waning, Um Saad shares with her, “My heart tonight is yearning for something, something beyond my reach. Allah created us like that. Yearning, wanting, wishing, desiring. I remember the first and the last time I went to the cinema” (Faqir, *Pillars* 47). Disempowerment, regardless of its cause, creates a void within its victim because it imposes an oppression, which, in turn, instigates the awareness that there is another world on the other side of victimization. “[W]omen’s choices are circumscribed under patriarchy and . . . a patriarchal society exercises illegitimate influences over women’s fears and desires, causing [them] to internalize [their] oppression” (Wendell 17). So when Um Saad breaks her rigid routine of confinement when her dad grants her the chance to go to the cinema, her longing and desires grow larger instead of pacify. She tells Maha, “I wish I had never gone to the cinema Then and there, I caught a disease called ‘longing.’ I yearned to see, hear, touch what takes place behind closed doors and quivering curtains” (Faqir, *Pillars* 48). Knowing what is available but unattainable to Um Saad is just as disempowering as never knowing at all. Um Saad believes that “Allah created human beings with a hole in the chest” (Faqir, *Pillars* 50), thus increasing her void and causing her to want more than what her current circumstances have to offer.

This damnation of being labeled as well as living with a void follows her into adulthood as she is denied the one she loves and is tricked by her father into a marriage with a man who will make her life miserable. During another night in the institution, Um Saad vulnerably shares this story with Maha, giving the reader a better understanding as to Abu Saad’s purpose for disempowering his wife:

Abu Saad was a fat and ugly butcher in the offal market. A disgusting profession. Nobody would let him marry their daughter. My father had accepted his proposal one Friday morning when he went to buy humous for breakfast from the coffee shop next to Abu Saad's butchery. Because I am an immigrant's daughter, people think I come out of a wall. No family tree or past. So, nobody would propose to immigrants. Abu Saad and me. The dropouts for the outcasts. The refuse for the junk. (Faqir, *Pillars* 123)

Um Saad's situation stretches beyond the walls of gender. "Arab society in general, and Jordanian society in particular, can be classified as 'neo-patriarchal', where power relationships are not only influenced by gender, but also by class, clan and proximity to the regime" (Faqir, "Intrafamily" 67). It would be easy to assume that the two pariahs, Abu Saad and Haniyyeh, would find solace with one another since they only find animosity in society. Unfortunately, Abu Saad uses his male privilege to create an environment of total domination within their marriage. Sadly, the only place Um Saad finds comfort is where she supposedly belongs, expanding the void within her. She admits, "You see, the kitchen was my domain, my space. I could shut the door and nobody would disturb me there. I wanted to talk. We never ever talked, Abu Saad and I. He gave orders and I listened . . . by your life, my days were just a series of jokes" (Faqir, *Pillars* 151). What could have been a marriage where strength and hope were foundational instead creates disempowerment from someone who should have been most sympathetic.

Although Fanon writes through the lens of a black man, some of his concepts are applicable to the woman who falls victim to the confines of her culture. Fanon states, "We must see whether it is possible for the black man to overcome his feeling of insignificance, to rid his life of the compulsive quality that makes it so like the behavior of the phobie. Affect is

exacerbated in the Negro, he is full of rage because he feels small, he suffers from an inadequacy in all human communication, and all these factors chain him with an unbearable insularity” (50). It is this belief of insignificance due to the oppression of the victor that disempowers Um Saad to the point of rage. She is literally stuck in her culture by spending twenty-five years confined to raising her children and cleaning her husband’s disgusting work clothes and animal parts he brings home. She tells Maha, “I stopped looking out of the window. Abu Saad allowed me to wear a veil and sit on the veranda which was totally surrounded with vine trees and jasmine” (Faqir, *Pillars* 130). Um Saad’s feelings of inadequacy only lead her to need permission from her husband in order to sit, head covered, on her own porch. Maybe she thought her extreme submission would help her find a place of significance in her victor’s eyes. Instead it lands her sleeping on her kitchen floor, playing the role of a slave to Abu Saad and his second wife.

Abu Saad finds in Haniyyeh a young woman who is accustomed to fear, and he uses that fear to manipulate and disempower. As her cousin broaches the idea with Um Saad’s father of going to the cinema, Um Saad admits, “I covered my head with my hands to protect myself from the debris of the explosion which was bound to happen. I waited, eyes closed, for metal buckles, splintered glass, and piercing words” (Faqir, *Pillars* 48). Though Um Saad is from his same disrespected social class as her husband, Abu Saad is confident he can continue the cycle of victimization and fear in her life. It is this notion of class that may be a major reason for Abu Saad’s destructive behavior. According to Hunnicutt, “[I]t is unlikely that men use violence as a tool to reinforce their position of power given that it is actually the least powerful men who victimize women under social pressure to accrue more power and redeem their ‘wounded masculinity’ Men use violence to maintain their advantage in the most *disadvantaged* situations” (559-60). Um Saad shares, “I will never forget one thing. At night, the man, my

husband...chased me and ripped my dress apart. Then he asked me in a weak, thin voice that made the build of his body look like a mistake, 'Have you had your period?' I shook my head. 'All the same.' He looked at me assessingly, patted my hairless stomach with his cold fingers, forced my legs open, then penetrated my discarded body" (Faqr, *Pillars* 109-10). Abu Saad dominates Um Saad because he knows he can because this is the lifestyle of which she is accustomed. For when she eventually fights against his control, he sees his power slipping and takes extreme measures to permanently confine her. What he does not know is that her journey to liberation is just beginning.

Victimization will never cease, so fighting the war for empowerment is continuous. Though Um Saad and Maha both handle their domination and feelings of insignificance with rage and retaliation, it is the ensuing revolt that is of greater importance because it proves that they are both aware of their value as human beings. Fadia Faqr vividly explains what is expected of Arab women, rules by which neither Um Saad nor Maha fully abide. She states, "In Arab societies women should remain *mastura* (hidden, low-profile) a term which implies physical and psychological confinement in the private and public space" ("Intrafamily" 69). Um Saad disobeys this creed, as she has had enough of the confinement in her kitchen. She admits, "I started leaving the kitchen and pacing around the house just to get some fresh air. The pacing became marching and the marching turned into running I felt light, happy, free" (Faqr, *Pillars* 187, 188). Um Saad's victor denies her the well-deserved rights of just being human, but at this specific moment in her life she is free from his oppression. "When there are no longer slaves, there are no longer masters" (Fanon 219), and Um Saad, through her rage of running around the house, finally finds her identity as a person instead of as a slave. Though this rage,

due to years of feeling insignificant, lands her in a mental hospital, it is the fact that Um Saad realizes she is worth more than the kitchen floor that is of the greatest value.

Glimmers of Hope, Power, and Liberation

Using the place she is most familiar with, Faqir creates a transparent Jordanian society to illustrate the disempowerment drowning its women, while at the same time giving her readers a glimpse of the possibilities that are still to come. In sharing her story of forbidden love, Um Saad states, “When you cannot get something, you keep thinking of it all the time” (Faqir, *Pillars* 150). Both Maha and Um Saad want something which they cannot have, and it is the intimacy of sharing these desires that they find strength in one another. Their moments together in the mental institution are designed to punish them for being women attempting to obtain liberation, but instead those moments give them power over their circumstances. Maha immediately goes to Um Saad’s rescue upon her first night in the hospital, and Um Saad admits to her, “Your hands when you were rubbing my body with cold water smelt of gardens, and meadows of ripe fruit. You transported me to my small garden at the top of Castle Mountain. By your life, you were not just rubbing my limbs with your fingers, but my heart too” (Faqir, *Pillars* 18). A victim of disempowerment must look outside her oppressor in order to hope for a solution to the struggles forced upon their rights as human beings. Um Saad and Maha find this hope with each other.

Maha wakes one morning to find Um Saad absent from the room, but when she is brought back, her body is convulsing. They have experienced so much separately and shared so much together that it comes as no surprise when Maha will not even allow the oppression of the mental hospital to cause their end. After quickly eating Maha states, “I wiped my mouth, rolled up my sleeves, and was ready to fight for the soul of my sister” (Faqir, *Pillars* 221). It’s a matter of the heart. It’s a matter of forcing oneself to look beyond the victor. It’s a matter of loving

oneself and others so much that hope resides within the confines of that love. People often have no control over their external environment, but it is the perception of themselves that may carry them through the oppression of disempowerment:

It sometimes seems that the better we understand the social forces which, in the long run, caused much of our unhappiness and frustration and could cause them again, the more difficult it is to maintain a sense of our own power to affect the future. Yet in order to act with any hope, and certainly to act with the kind of sustained energy and discipline needed to oppose oppression, we need to think of ourselves . . . as unfinished, capable of change, and capable of gaining power to direct our lives. (Wendell 15)

Whether slave to man, slave to one's culture, or slave to religion, Maha and Um Saad have proven to be capable of the changes necessary to gain the power needed to fight disempowerment. For it is often the journey instead of its end result that defines a person, slowly filling their voids and longings while pushing them further towards empowerment and liberation.

CHAPTER TWO: DREAMS OF TRESPASS

The human mind will not be confined to any limits.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Fatima Mernissi explores the reality of disempowerment in the Islamic world through her personal narrative, giving its readers a glimpse into life behind the walls of a harem. Though set in a different place from Faqir's fictional text, Mernissi's memoir maintains the reality of the disempowerment of Muslim women. What is experienced in the narrative is a young Fatima who is cognizant of what harem life represents not just for her but for the future of Muslim women. In the 1940's Morocco is already a country of unrest due to World War II and years of French colonization, but Fatima still envisions a progressive life for all women regardless of the bondage that comes with harem life. Fueled by a male-dominated society, the purpose of the harem remains a constant topic of discussion by its Muslim, female inhabitants. Though Fatima's mother submits to the authority of her husband and the veil, she does not suppress the innate desires of Fatima to gain liberation from her culturally oppressive society.

Disempowerment is proven to be an expected lifestyle as confinement and restrictions are questioned by young Fatima. From greeting her grandmother to getting out of the front gate, the females in the harem are plagued with rituals that are often justified as being part of their religion or culture. But it is the various women in Fatima's world who shape the nostalgic woman exposed through this narrative. Mernissi is not condemning of her heritage but rather curious to the point of making her people, as well as the world, aware of the potential Muslim women possess as long as they are not bound. In "Muslim Women and Fundamentalism," Fatima Mernissi admits, "Naive and serious as only a dutiful student can be, I did not know in 1975 that women's claims were disturbing to Muslim societies not because they threatened the past but because they augured and symbolized what the future and its conflicts are about: the

inescapability of renegotiating new sexual, political, economic, and cultural boundaries, thresholds and limits” (9). In *Dreams of Trespass*, Mernissi is encouraged not to fall victim to the boundaries of the harem or to life as a Muslim. As a result, she finds that escape from confinement and the disempowerment it creates is certain for her as she continuously discovers pieces of her identity while blossoming into womanhood behind the walls.

The Harem Defined

Mernissi begins her narrative by painting a picture of the physical aspects of a harem, a clear reflection of the restricted life she lives. She states, “First, there was the square and rigid courtyard, where symmetry ruled everything. Even the white marble fountain, forever bubbling in the courtyard center, seemed controlled and tamed” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 4). “Controlled” and “tamed” are key words because they not only describe how Mernissi feels as a denizen of a harem, but they also define her lifestyle. In “Paradise Regained? The Harem in Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*,” Marta Mamet-Michalkiewicz gives a definition of a harem that centers on those same two words. She asserts, “Even the etymology of the word ‘harem’ metaphorically refers to a jail, as *harām* means ‘the forbidden’ in Arabic, whereas ‘seraglio’, which is derived from Italian, literally means ‘a cage for wild animals’ [T]he harem consists of a house or set of houses surrounded by gates” (152). Spatial confinement is the most obvious nuisance to Fatima’s life in a harem. When she looks up while standing in the courtyard, Fatima admits, “When you lifted your eyes toward the sky, you could see an elegant two-story structure with the top floors repeating the square arched colonnade of the courtyard And finally, you had the sky—hanging up above but still strictly square-shaped, like all the rest, and solidly framed Looking at the sky from the courtyard was an

overwhelming experience” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 5). The vast sky is even framed and boxed for the females in the harem so that only portions of its magnificence are revealed.

Harems are often illustrated as places of beauty and elegance, symbolic of Arabic women. In terms of how Mernissi describes her harem, Mamet-Michalkiewicz provides such a paradox based on a Western perspective, stating that, “[t]he notion of the harem has strong metaphoric potential. It attracted significant interest in the wake of European expansion and renewed the West’s fascination with the Orient. The Western image of the harem is incontestably imbued with a vision of an exotic paradise” (145). Mernissi’s description does not support this notion of the harem as a place of paradise but rather illustrates the harem as a “*hudud*, or sacred frontier,” one in which the women long to cross. Fatima states, “In a harem, you don’t necessarily ask questions to get answers. You ask questions just to understand what is happening to you. Roaming freely in the streets was every woman’s dream” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 22). This is, in essence, the theme of her memoir; Fatima wants to know why harems exist and, in doing so, create an outlet for her own liberation.

According to Mamet-Michalkiewicz, “[Mernissi] adroitly deconstructs the myth of the harem as paradise, an exotic place populated by nude, voluptuous women, as perpetuated in Orientalist literature and paintings. The novel advances fantasies of mobility that are diametrically opposed to both Western and Eastern notions of paradisaic permanence” (145). Fatima vividly illustrates the fact that a harem is far from any form of utopia. In fact she shares that “women dreamed of trespassing all the time. The world beyond the gate was their obsession. They fantasized all day long about parading in unfamiliar streets, while the Christians kept crossing the sea, bringing death and chaos” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 2). “Just as, according to Edward Said, ‘The Orient was almost a European invention,’ the harem, as an integral part of this

invention, was a Western construct as well” (Mamet-Michalkiewicz 145-6). Mernissi’s memoir articulates just how oppressive harem life is for Muslim females, very contrasting from the idea of it being a paradise. She metaphorically describes the walls of her harem to illustrate the disempowerment created by patriarchy. The physical magnificence observed in the architecture and design of a harem as well as its reputation as a result of sends an erroneous message to an outsider. From Mernissi’s perspective the harem possesses a culture that thrives on oppressing the ideas and desires of its women, all symbolically represented through the harem itself. Gary S. Gregg eloquently articulates an overview of Mernissi’s narrative in “Culture, Personality, and the Multiplicity of Identity: Evidence from North African Life Narratives.” He asserts, “For Mernissi in the 1940s, the geometric lines stretched from the corridors, mosaic tiles, and rectangular perspective lines of her family’s palatial home in Fez, defining not exile, deprivation, and abuse, but limits, immobilities, and silences Tradition reigns but liberation beckons” (122). It is through the women in her life, women with assorted stories and perspectives of disempowerment, that Fatima begins to search for her own personal liberation in spite of the confining traditions held tightly within the Mernissi harem.

Yasmina Instills Power Within Fatima

Fatima’s maternal grandmother, Yasmina, gives her an especially unusual outlook about harem life from those she receives in her own because Yasmina’s harem is an unconfined space. Because there are no literal boundaries, such a space leaves Fatima uncomfortable. She admits:

Often I could not sleep the first few nights on Yasmina’s farm—the frontiers were not clear enough. There were no closed gates to be seen anywhere, only wide, flat, open fields where flowers grew and animals wandered peaceably about. But Yasmina explained to me that the farm was part of Allah’s original earth, which

had no frontiers, just vast, open fields without borders or boundaries, and that I should not be afraid. But how could I walk in an open field without being attacked? (Mernissi, *Dreams* 25)

Fatima is accustomed to a life where men are the head of a society that sets the boundaries, giving her a sense of protection, so the freedom of Yasmina's harem causes Fatima an almost guilty uneasiness. In Yasmina's harem there are no physical walls to hold its women, much less their ideas and opinions. Yasmina says to Fatima, "'Are we Muslims or not? If we are, everyone is equal. Allah said so. His prophet preached the same.' Yasmina said that I should never accept inequality, for it was not logical" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 26). Yasmina certainly does not accept inequality, especially with her co-wives. She is so bold as to even name her duck Lalla Thor, the same name of a co-wife who seems to think she is superior to the rest.

Though Yasmina's lifestyle is much more independent than Fatima's, Yasmina is still aware of the oppression that comes from just being female. "The world, Yasmina said, was not concerned about being fair to women. Rules were made in such a manner as to deprive them in some way or another In fact, the *qa'ida*, the invisible rule, often was much worse than walls and gates. With walls and gates, you at least knew what was expected from you" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 63). The women who live in harems not fortified by walls and gates are still bound, maintaining a cultural patriarchy that is difficult to conquer. In "Colonialism and Gender in the East: Representations of the Harem in the Writings of Women Travellers," Shirley Foster discusses harems through the lens of feminism. She asserts that "[i]n such a context, moral responses are frequently articulated as sympathy, representing the harem women as victims of a system that enslaves their bodies and colonizes their minds" (10). While exposing Fatima to a different type of harem, Yasmina still maintains the idea that any type of harem involves

figurative boundaries, regardless of its literal ones. Rules or not, walls or not, oppression still lingers for the victims of the harem. Victimization is a product of disempowerment, which is caused by superior groups commanding their authority, as is the case with Fatima as she struggles with the disempowerment of females as a result of harem life. Yasmina, through her own lifestyle and words, gives Fatima hope for the future regardless of her current victimization.

In “Feminine Strength: Reflections on Power and Gender in Israeli-Palestinian Culture,” Amalia Sa’ar discusses *qawiyyi*, or feminine strength, a characteristic mirrored by Yasmina. “The discourse of *qawiyyi* . . . portrays strong, accomplished, and prominent women, who are challenged not to violate the normative boundaries of feminine morality . . . as their transformative, generative power is incessantly pitted against forces of coercion and domination” (404). This force is a dominant factor in Lalla Thor, who embodies the traditional, submissive Muslim woman as well as in the male-dominated culture that supports a powerless female society. But Yasmina is sure that her strength and boldness as a woman will not be wasted, for it is Fatima who holds the future of Muslim women, evidenced in this conversation between Fatima and Yasmina: “‘But why aren’t [the rules] made by women?’ I asked. ‘The moment women get smart and start asking that very question,’ [Yasmina] replied, ‘instead of dutifully cooking and washing dishes all the time, they will find a way to change the rules and turn the whole planet upside down’” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 63). Yasmina is aware of the restrictions but persuades Fatima on the issues surrounding the potential of her own future. “[W]omen who are locally classified as ‘strong’ (*qawiyyi*) represent the limitations that normative femininity imposes on women’s ability to accrue power. Conversely, those . . . classif[ied] as ‘powerful’ pose an important challenge to this norm, by embodying broader options to legitimate femininity” (Sa’ar 404). Fatima is the key to enforcing domination over her male-privileged

society. Yasmina is sure of this and tells her, “You will be a modern, educated lady. You will realize the nationalists’ dream . . . At the very least you will certainly be better off than your mother. Remember that even I, as illiterate and bound by tradition as I am, have managed to squeeze some happiness out of this damned life. That is why I don’t want you to focus on the frontiers and barriers all the time” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 64). Yasmina inspires the hope of young Fatima to be happy, pushing her even more toward the life of liberation and empowerment that she knows every woman deserves.

Her Mother Becomes a Voice for Fatima

Along with her harem serving as a frontier, Fatima knows that it also serves another purpose. She asserts, “Our house gate also protected us from the foreigners standing a few meters away, at another equally busy and dangerous frontier We knew that the French were greedy and had come a long way to conquer our land, even though Allah had already given them a beautiful one But somehow the French needed to get more” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 23). Invading Morocco yet allowing the natives their own space permitted the French to create the fear of the unknown among the Moroccans while still enforcing their authority. As Deena observes:

The colonizer’s perspective attained supremacy over the colonized’s views, needs, and differences. They suppressed the colonized’s heterogeneity into a homogeneous prison, and they built their own homogeneous communities in the colonies [H]omogeneity strengthens the colonizer’s ‘self-confidence and self-sufficiency,’ and as a result . . . they are protected from the dangers of losing their sense of identity through submergence, assimilation, and influence. (18)

Fatima is well-aware that the French have claimed a section of Morocco as their own and are reforming issues such as attire and education in her Islamic community. But instead of viewing colonization from the perspective of one obsessed with tradition, Fatima, supported by her mother, sees their invasion as an outlet for reform and longs to use it to make sense of the authority within her harem. Her mother says to her, “With all these new things now being invented by the Christians, by the time you grow up, you’ll be able to buy glass houses with removable ceilings” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 179). This encourages Fatima and spurs her belief in an empowering future. Fatima thinks, “From within the harem, the possibilities to make life enjoyable seemed infinite—walls were going to disappear, and houses with glass ceilings were going to replace them. Imprisoned behind walls, women walked around dreaming of frontierless horizons” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 179). Her curiosity and determination fueled by her mother’s own desire for relief leads Fatima on a search for what a harem really is and what purpose it is designed to serve, prompting her to believe in a life with no boundaries.

Being educated in a traditional, Koranic school, Fatima comes to believe that “[e]ducation is to know the *hudud*, the sacred frontiers To be a Muslim was to respect the *hudud*. And for a child, to respect the *hudud* was to obey” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 3). After talking with her cousin Malika who tells her that “[t]he *hudud* was whatever the teacher forbade,” Fatima admits that “looking for the frontier has become [her] life’s occupation” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 3). Fatima already knows that there is a life beyond the harem walls and even outside the instruction of Lalla Tam. Her search to make empowerment happen only heightens her longing for liberation, something that may come from a least expected source. “Apart from the harem women’s attempts to violate prescribed dress codes and eating habits, Mernissi also records their efforts to come into contact with the Western world, which they associate with freedom”

(Mamet-Michalkiewicz 154). For the younger generation living in the Mernissi harem, this freedom comes in the form of education introduced by the French.

Based on the beliefs and lifestyle of Yasmina, it is not a surprise when Fatima says that her mother “had always rejected male superiority as nonsense and totally anti-Muslim” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 9). Fatima’s mother concedes that “the reason why men kept women in harems was to prevent them from becoming too smart” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 186) and advocates for Fatima to be able to attend the nationalist primary school. The family council accepts, yet they deny Fatima’s mother from being able to attend literacy classes. Very disconcerted, her mother passionately poses these questions to Lalla Mani, “Who is benefiting from a harem? What good can I do for our country, sitting here a prisoner in this courtyard? Why are we deprived of education? Who created the harem and for what? Can anyone explain that to me?” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 200). Salam Al-Mahadin has a clear explanation for Mother’s burden of disempowerment in “Jordanian Women in Education: Politics, Pedagogy and Gender Discourses.” She states:

A woman's history can never be divorced from a nation's history of confrontation and struggles, especially in colonial contexts where women have been held prisoners to both the colonizer and the colonized, each of whom sought control over the other through the control of women. The colonizer drew upon his Enlightenment universal ideals of female liberation as a means for subverting and dehumanizing the local male while the latter, the proverbial colonized and oppressed ‘local’ male, strove to control the female veiled body as means for holding on to tradition in the face of the modernizing efforts of the

colonizers In other words, the female metamorphosed into a field of struggle between a local man who was intent on guarding his national identity and a foreigner/colonizer conspiring to conquer and divest him off such identity by ‘emancipating’ the female body and ‘redeeming’ her status. (25)

The nationalists did not afford women such opportunities like education by accident, for it is this method that would be used to break the confinement of the traditional Muslim female impressed upon them by the colonized male. Fatima becomes engrossed in Chama’s books of chants and incantations but is also quick to admit that magic “did not really endanger the harem nearly as much as did the nationalists’ decision to encourage women’s education.” She states, “The entire city was turned upside down when the religious authorities . . . supported the women’s rights to go to school” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 196). Fatima’s father, the colonized male, is obviously threatened by the French and claims, “We live in difficult times, the country is occupied by foreign armies, our culture is threatened. All we have left is these traditions” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 78). It is exactly these traditions that oppress Fatima’s mother, leaving her no other choice but to make sure that Fatima takes full advantage of the opportunities offered by the nationalists.

Mernissi discusses the recent shift in traditions and culture among Muslims. She asserts, “Fundamentalists are right in saying that education for women has destroyed the traditional boundaries and definitions of space and sex roles. Schooling has dissolved traditional arrangements of space segregation” (“Muslim” 11). Such transformations bring Fatima great excitement because they do, indeed, give her a glimpse at life outside the *hudud*. The hope of progression is so electrifying that Mother passionately takes her disappointment of not getting an education and professes her confidence in the fact that her daughter will become a catalyst for change on behalf of all Muslim females. With intense enthusiasm she says to Fatima, “You are

going to transform this world, aren't you? You are going to create a planet without walls and without frontiers, where the gatekeepers have off every day of the year" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 201). Colonization not only caused a much accepted breach in tradition by the females but also a chance for empowerment for those not already trapped by the constraints of oppression. Lalla Mani is sure that tradition reigns supreme. "You can be sure that your ancestors have already discovered the best way of doing things,' she said, looking directly at Mother To do anything new was *bid'a*, a criminal violation of our sacred tradition" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 207). Fatima's mother is zealous in her quest to revolutionize tradition, and she is definitely not going to let opportunities afforded by the Western world heap traditional conviction on herself while passing her daughter by.

Aunt Habiba Teaches Fatima How to Dream

Aunt Habiba is well aware of her isolation as a woman and, more damning, as a divorcee, yet she still shares her feminist beliefs without restraint. "Aunt Habiba, who had been cast off and sent away suddenly for no reason by a husband she loved dearly, said that Allah had sent the Northern armies to Morocco to punish the men for violating the *hudud* protecting women. When you hurt a woman, you are violating Allah's sacred frontier. It is unlawful to hurt the weak" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 3). Forced to live on the third floor of the harem and even to walk at the back of the line on the way to the movies, Aunt Habiba does not allow this oppression to define her place among the other Mernissi females, for she knows that her treatment is not a valid extension of her religion. In "Islamic Law and Gender Equality: Could There Be a Common Ground?: A Study of Divorce and Polygamy in Sharia Law and Contemporary Legislation in Tunisia and Egypt," Amira Mashhour asserts:

Any discussion relating to women in Muslim societies has to take Islamic law (Sharia) into consideration to show that either Islam does or does not give women certain rights. What is clear in the Quran is that men and women have equal religious duties, rewards, and punishments before God [M]ost of the gender inequalities are not based on Islam but are mainly the result of traditional, patriarchal, male-dominated societies' practices that aim to dominate women and to find any pretext to suppress them. (564)

Aunt Habiba could possibly be aware that the correlation between her religion and her oppression is a farce, just a manmade gimmick to assert authority. Regardless she is still bound. “The exclusion of women from decision-making processes, inequality of opportunity, oppressive social and cultural practices have exacerbated gender-bias in the Arab world” (Al-Mahadin 23), but Aunt Habiba is too aware of her value as a human being, and even as a woman, in spite of her culture, to be fully excluded. “Her husband had kept everything from their marriage, with the idea that should he ever lift his finger and ask her to come home again, she would bow her head and come rushing back. ‘But he can never take the most important things away from me,’ Aunt Habiba would say sometimes, ‘my laughter and all the wonderful stories I can tell when the audience is worth it’” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 17). This confidence, independence, and free spirit are exactly what draw Fatima to her aunt.

To Fatima, Aunt Habiba, based on her circumstances, seems to be an expert in escape and empowerment:

Aunt Habiba was certain that we all had magic inside, woven into our dreams.

“When you happen to be trapped powerless behind walls, stuck in a dead-end harem,” she would say, “you dream of escape. And magic flourishes when you

spell out that dream and make the frontiers vanish. Dreams can change your life, and eventually the world. Liberation starts with images dancing in your little head, and you can translate those images in words. And words cost nothing!”

(Mernissi, *Dreams* 114)

Daring and bold, Aunt Habiba crosses lines that a divorced Muslim woman dare not cross. Her lack of submission to her culture proves to Fatima that the *hudud* is not the only way to believe. “Aunt Habiba said that anyone could develop wings. It was only a matter of concentration. The wings need not be visible like the birds’; invisible ones were just as good, and the earlier you started focusing on the flight, the better” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 204). Such whimsical ideas only heighten Fatima’s curiosity and search. “In *Dreams of Trespass* [tension] appears as qualities of motion and dreams of flight, and in the characters of powerful women who trespass and show [Fatima] glimpses of the future her mother raises her to seek” (Gregg 123). Who better to guide Fatima on her flight from disempowerment than one who will live the rest of her life under the weight of patriarchy while choosing to dream and fly forward, refusing to be bound in her static, dominating world.

Tradition can often override the ethical rights of human beings, causing even more frustration and oppression to an already disturbing lifestyle. Aunt Habiba compares the plight of women with Fatima’s interest in acrobatics. “Real life is tougher than theater . . . Besides, our tradition requires women to walk on their feet” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 127). It would take more than an acrobatic trick to bring happiness and liberation to Fatima and her fellow females because of the deep mistreatment and disempowerment brought about by patriarchy. Fatima may be young, but she still knows that her life locked within the frontier of a harem is far from what she deserves. “All forms of exploitation are identical because all of them are applied against the

same 'object': man. When one tries to examine the structure of this or that form of exploitation from an abstract point of view, one simply turns one's back on the major, basic problem, which is that of restoring man to his proper place" (Fanon 88). Fatima finds glimpses of that restoration through Aunt Habiba's concept of maintaining a dream. "Aunt Habiba said, '[Dreams] give a sense of direction. It is not enough to reject this courtyard—you need to have a vision of the meadows with which you want to replace it.' She also said that I should not worry for now, because I belonged to a long line of women with strong dreams Aunt Habiba said . . . 'You'll be able to transform people, I'm sure of it'" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 215). Fatima's empowerment is not determined by the harem, any *hudud*, or her heritage, but, because of Aunt Habiba, Fatima is assured that her oppression will begin to subside with the start of a dream.

Mina Serves as Fatima's Savior

With her ritualistic dancing and a story that transcends all stories of survival, Mina instills within Fatima a more solid, daring determination. Fatima admits: "I wanted to dance like her, with the community, but also to my own secret music, springing from a mysterious source deep within, and stronger than the drums. Stronger yet softer and more liberating" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 162). Fatima learns from Mina that she cannot let the oppression of her external sources dictate her future and looks to Mina as a sort of mentor. "Knowledge of exceptional women who resisted oppression successfully, some of them from severely underprivileged or victimized positions, is a source of inspiration and hope for women They want to know about such women, are hungry for the details of their lives, and speak proudly of them. They are able to identify with them and want to learn their tactics and strategies" (Wendell 42). Mina's story of captivity leads Fatima to hope for and strategize her own freedom. She learns from Mina that "[a]ngry women are hostages of their anger. They cannot escape it and set themselves free,

which is indeed a sad fate. The worst of prisons is the self-created one” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 162). Through Mina Fatima learns that victimization can be overcome regardless of its harsh purposes, but that victory depends on the victim. This leads Fatima to concoct the unusual tactic of hiding in the olive jar, preparing herself to overcome.

The disempowerment Fatima experiences does not even compare with Mina’s journey, allowing for a very different perspective of colonization and harem life. As a slave from Sudan, Mina is a victim of slave trade. Kidnapped not far from her parent’s house, Mina is lowered down into a well and must hang onto the rope in order to survive the snake-infested waters below. She admits, “I could not even afford to tremble with fear, because if I did, the rope would slip out of my fingers. It would be the end” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 168). Mina’s story of how she escapes the well leaves her appreciative of life in the Mernissi harem:

Once freed, however, many female slaves like Mina were too weak to fight, too shy to seduce, too breathless to protest, and too poor to return to their native lands. Or else, they were too unsure of what they would find once they were back there. All they really wanted was a calm room to stretch out in and let the years roll by. A place where they could forget about the senseless succession of days and nights, and dream of a better world in which violence and women walked separate paths. (Mernissi, *Dreams* 165)

After settling with the Mernissi’s, Mina does more than just dream; she candidly shares the victimization she endured, giving Fatima a fresh perspective on the issue of confinement. Fatima comes to understand that the source of disempowerment is not limited to harem walls. It can occur as a result of physical violence as well as societal demarcation. Though Mina is no longer part of her Sudan community, she has undoubtedly found her purpose within the Mernissi harem.

This gives hope to young Fatima, who admits, “Mina was incredibly popular with us children, so much so that mothers would enlist her help when they were having a hard time communicating with their sons or daughters” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 166). Mina finds purpose as a result of violence and uses her experience in the well for the possible liberation of others, particularly Fatima. She tells her, “The frontier indicates the line of power because wherever there is a frontier, there are two kinds of creatures walking on Allah’s earth, the powerful on one side, and the powerless on the other If you can’t get out, you are on the powerless side” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 242). Mina chose the powerful side when she survived the well. And it is Mina who prophecies Fatima’s fate, for she becomes Fatima’s savior when she hides in the olive jar. Fatima knows that something has to change in order for female empowerment to occur, and she is sure that Mina’s experience in the well can be a method for that change. Fatima is ready to experience her own literal entrapment and triumph. She admits, “I needed to train myself to get out of the well first, and for a while, jumping into dark, empty olive jars became my favorite game” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 171). The figurative implication illustrates the childlike innocence and imagination Fatima possesses, but its literal meaning is much deeper.

In “Women, Saints, and Sanctuaries,” Fatima Mernissi discusses the idea that female disempowerment is a result of no education. She states, “Women, in particular, who are always the ones to be kept illiterate (and 97 percent of rural Moroccan women still are), are described as simple-minded, superstitious creatures, incapable of sophisticated thinking, who indulge in esoteric mysticism” (106). Mina is aware that, though she is no longer threatened by the cruelty of the slave trade, her life in the harem is a life of physical as well as traditional confinements. “She was condemned to wear yellow because she was possessed by a foreign *djinni* who forbade her to wear other colors” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 157). But instead of allowing any kind of sadness

and bitterness to overtake her, Mina chooses to be an outlet of inspiration for Fatima. Fatima admits, “Mina was very optimistic and said that no, there was no reason at all why I should be afraid. ‘Life is looking good for women now,’ she said ‘For you know, the problem with women today is that they are powerless. And powerlessness stems from ignorance and a lack of education’” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 170). Unlike Fatima’s mother, Mina had endured and overcome horrendous obstacles and near-death experiences, but similar to her mother, Mina trusts that this new system of education will take Fatima places about which she can only dream. Mina is certain that Fatima will not always be stuck in the well. She says to Fatima, “You are going to be a powerful woman, aren’t you . . . ? There is always a little part of the sky you can raise your head to. So, don’t look down, look up, up and off we go! Making wings!” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 170). Hiding in the olive jars is more than just a game for Fatima; it is the only way for a little girl to understand how to find freedom from the captivity of culture.

Mina’s experiences stand unparalleled to those of Fatima’s mother, grandmother, and aunt, so Fatima looks to Mina as a sure source of strength in her own search for empowerment. Through her story of surviving the well, Mina proves that “Muslim women were not, after all, the passive creatures, wholly without material resources or legal rights that the Western world imagined them to be. But women were active . . . within the very limited parameters permitted by their society” (qtd. in Mamet-Michalkiewicz 149). What is so fascinating about Mina is that she broke loose from her societal parameters, choosing life over death, liberation over suppression. “‘Going into that well,’ [Mina] would say, ‘made me see that when you are in trouble, you need to put all your energies into thinking that there is a way out. Then, the bottom, the dark hole, becomes just a springboard from which you can leap so high that your head might hit a cloud’” (Mernissi, *Dreams* 170). Though Fatima would probably never experience

victimization on the same horrific level as Mina, she has reason to believe that life in the Mernissi harem is a form of it. Of Mina's experience in the well, she admits, "I needed to hear that story told again, and again, and again, so that I, too, could cross the desert and arrive safely at the terrace. Talking to Mina was essential, because I needed to know all the details. I needed to know more—I needed to know how to get out of the well" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 169).

Fatima Stands Destined for Empowerment

Fatima has the potential to embody Edward Said's claims in *Orientalism* that "the Arab is chained to a destiny that fixes him and dooms him to a series of reactions" (286). Because her life is confined to a harem and is outlined by traditional and cultural beliefs, it is expected of Fatima to adapt to the oppression created by this disempowerment. But what sets Fatima apart from those who conform to what is predestined are women in her life who know what is available to future generations of Muslim women. Fatima is vulnerable in sharing about her mother. "[Mother] would tell me that whatever else I did with my life, I had to take her revenge. 'I want my daughters' lives to be exciting,' she would say, 'very exciting and filled with one hundred percent happiness, nothing more, nothing less'" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 79-80). Even as a young girl Fatima is made aware that she has an outlet for escape and the potential to achieve what her elders could not. "To be happy, [Yasmina] said, a woman had to think hard, during long silent hours, about how to make each small step forward" (Mernissi, *Dreams* 152). Regardless of the walls surrounding her, Fatima longs for, strives for, and determines for a limitless, liberating future, full of dreams, love, and happiness, one story at a time.

CHAPTER THREE: NERVOUS CONDITIONS

Always bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed is more important than any other one thing.

Abraham Lincoln

Living in a society where opportunity rarely knocks for females, young Tambudzai counts it a privilege to leave her homestead and join her extended family at the mission where she will receive a first-rate education in colonial Rhodesia during the 1960's. Leaving behind the drudgery of everyday village life, Tambu expects to encounter a life where burdens cease and opportunities are the norm during Britain's occupation. As Tambu settles into this new, exciting chapter in her life, she gets to know her cousin, who is smothered by an assimilated life. In "Debunking Patriarchy: The Liberational Quality of Voicing in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," Pauline Ada Uwakweh provides a clear, concise purpose of the novel. She states, "[Dangarembga's] primary agenda in *Nervous Conditions* is to expose the mechanism of male domination in Zimbabwean society. She thus explores the patterns of female subordination arising from patriarchy and its inter-relationship with the experience of colonization" (77). Oppression has led to void, and void to determination, leaving Tambu hopeful in the shadow of her brother's death. On the contrary her cousin Nyasha has never had any need to possess a vision for success, as her father's hard work has paved a comfortable road for her. Where colonization is Tambu's reason for progression, it is the cause of Nyasha's oppression. Both Shona girls fight for a voice in their male-dominated worlds and never cease in their determination to be heard.

Tambu is Destined to Overcome

The result of oppression due to patriarchy leaves Tambu with no apologies for her honesty as early as the first line of the text. She bluntly states, "I was not sorry when my brother

died. Nor am I apologizing for my callousness, as you may define it, my lack of feeling. For it is not that at all” (Dangarembga 1). Tambu is not unappreciative of her homestead life in Rhodesia; she just knows that her capabilities surpass all expectations her culture has predestined for her, especially those of which her brother Nhamo constantly reminds her. In reference to her opportunity at Sacred Heart, Tambu asserts, “I was to take another step upwards in the direction of my freedom. Another step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full, from dirt and disease, from my father’s abject obeisance to Babamukuru and my mother’s chronic lethargy. Also from Nyamarira that I loved” (Dangarembga 183). No matter the cost, Tambu finds an outlet for her disempowerment through education, and she is willing to leave everything behind to obtain it.

Dangarembga eloquently leads her readers on the journey of Tambu’s thirst for escape from her male-privileged society, which is illustrated by Nhamo. In “Melancholic Women: The Intellectual Hysteric(s) in *Nervous Conditions*,” Supriya Nair asserts, “Although the family unit is the primary space of identity, the narrator, Tambu, who is thirteen when her brother dies in 1968, challenges the rhetoric of harmonious domesticity by identifying her brother as an antagonist and a rival” (133). Jaja is well aware that his education at the mission is of top priority to the family and uses this to attack anyone he deems inferior, like his sisters. Tambu states, “[Nhamo] was satanically good at insinuating himself so sneakily into your most sensitive spots that if you did not know him well you could end up thinking you were being unfair to him when he annoyed you” (Dangarembga 48). Through education Nhamo lives the life Tambu desperately longs for, believing he has the right to manipulate and degrade. He intentionally forces conflict and struggle on his sisters because their repressive culture gives him status over them. In “The Sabotage of Patriarchy in Colonial Rhodesia, Rural African Women’s Living Legacy to Their

Daughters,” Julia C. Wells reveals evidence of an oral history project where three generations of Rhodesian women were interviewed. She states, “From the 1920s through to the 1960s, the prejudice against educating girls was extremely potent. Where funds were limited, sons always got preference. No female informants of the older two generations reported receiving equal access to education as their brothers. Most painted a grim picture of the heartache of exclusion from schooling which they often desperately wanted” (110). Tambu is a victim of the same heartache as she watches her parents work diligently to ensure Nhamo’s education while ignoring her desires and abilities.

Nhamo’s demeaning comments to Tambu become a constant reminder of the future her culture has in store for her. He is there at every turn to provoke, and even has the audacity to say to Tambu, “Babamukuru wants a clever person, somebody who deserves the chance. That’s why he wants me. He knows I’ve been doing very well at school. Who else is there for him to take?” (Dangarembga 47). At one point Nhamo even admits that he “was meant to be educated” (Dangarembga 49), confirming what Tambu already knows. She admits, “The needs and sensibilities of the women in my family were not considered a priority, or even legitimate In those days I felt the injustice of my situation every time I thought about it Thinking about it, feeling the injustice of it, this is how I came to dislike my brother, and not only my brother: my father, my mother—in fact everybody” (Dangarembga 12). Uwakweh validates the strife between Nhamo and Tambu when she states, “[T]he major source of conflict between the two siblings is Tambu’s loss of opportunity to start early schooling because her brother, the male child, is given priority consideration. Coupled with Nhamo’s obnoxious display of male authority and power, these become a source of conflict between them” (80). Nhamo is patriarchal oppression personified, with its aggravation, subjugation, and frustration. But what is meant to

bring victimization on Tambu produces within her a determined spirit sure that her abilities will undoubtedly outweigh her circumstances. “Tambu’s determination to overcome her marginal status shows in her earlier attempts to cultivate a maize field in order to raise money for her primary education. Symbolically, it is also an attempt to define herself in a male world” (Uwakweh 80). Through growing, harvesting, and selling her own corn, Tambu realizes that she is her own support system and worthy of an education.

Tambu is far from naïve about the favoritism shown to Nhamo. She discusses the strenuous work her mother puts into ensuring Nhamo can continue his education at Rutivi, all the while knowing that her desire to return is financially impossible and culturally insignificant. She shares, “My father thought I should not mind. ‘Is anything to worry about? Ha-a-a, it’s nothing,’ he reassured me, with his usual ability to jump whichever way was easiest. ‘Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables’” (Dangarembga 15). Such a request is not beyond Tambu’s capabilities, and she lauds her grandmother for teaching her to harvest vegetables even though it is for a purpose different from the one her father insists. “Praising my disposition towards working, [my grandmother] consolidated it in me as a desirable habit” (Dangarembga 17). This “desirable habit” is the key to overcoming all attempts of her father to extinguish her desire for education. In “Transgressing Boundaries: Marginality, Complicity and Subversion in *Nervous Conditions*,” Sheena Patchay states, “Tambu . . . reinvents the markers of her poverty and gender by disproving her father’s contemptuous notion that books cannot be cooked The maize she plants and ‘sells’ to Doris ensures her primary school education” (153). Tambu breaks the cycle of poverty and disempowerment for future generations through her reinvention. She resists her

predestined future by allowing the skills acquired to survive in her poverty to bring her prosperity.

Tambu's mother Mainini is indisputably a victim of her male-privileged society and does nothing to find a way out for her daughter. Tambu even admits that her mother's attitude toward her persistence to harvest and sell mealies to earn her school fees mirrors that of her father's. Tambu shares, "I think my mother admired my tenacity, and also felt sorry for me because of it. She began to prepare me for disappointment long before I would have been forced to face up to it. To prepare me she began to discourage me. 'And do you think you are so different, so much better than the rest of us? Accept your lot and enjoy what you can of it. There is nothing else to be done'" (Dangarembga 20). For women like Mainini, the only way to cope with the oppression is to accept it and understand that it will be difficult. Tambu has no external support but knows, through her own observations of Maiguru, that her final destination does not have to be her Shona homestead. Tambu respectfully listens to her mother while internally weighing the accuracy of her opinion:

'This business of womanhood is a heavy burden How could it not be? Aren't we the ones who bear children? When it is like that you can't just decided today I want to do this, tomorrow I want to do that, the next day I want to be educated! When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who has to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age And these days it is worse, with the poverty of blackness on one side and the weight of womanhood on the other ' My mother said being a woman was a burden . . . [b]ut I did not think this was true. (Dangarembga 16)

Tambu sees the educated and prosperous life Maiguru has and knows her own deserves more than to be defined by cooking and cleaning for a husband and children. In ““You Had a Daughter, but I Am Becoming a Woman’: Sexuality, Feminism and Postcoloniality in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and *She No Longer Weeps*,” Carolyn Martin Shaw addresses Tambu’s recognition of patriarchy as a source of her disempowerment. She asserts, “The culminating moment of feminist consciousness in *Nervous Conditions* is when Tambu . . . realizes that femaleness and not poverty, education, or tradition is responsible for women’s position in society” (14). Tambu, unlike her mother, makes time to hope and refuses to douse the desire for more. She understands that there is a source deeper than one boy’s aggravation and teasing that causes her victimization.

Ultimately Tambu does not blame Nhamo for his behavior and, in a sense, comes to terms with the struggle her femaleness will always bring her. She actually gives her brother the benefit of the doubt and views him as a victim of his own circumstances. She admits, “Perhaps I am making it seem as though Nhamo simply decided to be obnoxious and turned out to be good at it, when in reality that was not the case; when in reality he was doing no more than behave, perhaps extremely, in the expected manner” (Dangarembga 12). Her excuse for his behavior does not mean that she gives up hope for her own chance at success. “Tambu is not sad when her brother dies. His death becomes instead her opportunity to regain lost grounds in her educational career” (Uwakweh 80). Her lack of remorse does not prove that she is callous or unsympathetic; Tambu is keen enough to know that his death is her only outlet for the life she knows she is destined to live.

Nyasha is Determined to Be Heard

From the outside it seems as though the young daughter of the prosperous Babamukuru is living life on easy street. “The easiest path to education and future economic and social emancipation for young women growing up in colonial Rhodesia in the 1920s and 1930s lay with those born into the families of Christian converts” (Wells 107). With colonization came Christian missionaries who thought it to be their duty to convert and educate. The goal was to liberate, but the result left those, like Nyasha, who were trapped in both worlds, burdened and confused. “Nyasha, the outsider, sees the virulence of both patriarchy and colonialism and the ways in which their naturalization entraps, though *not* necessarily with violence” (Patchay 151). Dangarembga presents Nyasha’s resistance similar to the ways of a typical teenager through her voiced opinions and open rebellion. She symbolizes what Deena refers to as “unrealism, illusion, and mimicry of what the students [of colonial education] are and what they should be, of the private and public, and of the internal and external” (94). After Tambu moves to the mission, she quickly notices that there is a certain idiosyncrasy about Nyasha. Tambu admits, “I admired her abundance of spirit even though I could not see where it was directed: Nyasha had everything, should have been placid and content. My cousin was perplexing. She was not something you could dissect with reason” (Dangarembga 96). Nyasha’s is a journey of disempowerment to the extreme, as the battle between tradition and modernity wages within her. Instead of viewing her circumstances as a priceless advantage, Nyasha’s exposure becomes a curse that almost kills her.

Until given the chance to live and even room with Nyasha, Tambu views Nyasha’s lifestyle as golden. During Tambu’s first day at the mission, Babamukuru insists he have a word with her. Tambu states, “Babamukuru had summoned me to make sure that I knew how lucky I was to have been given this opportunity for mental and eventually, through it, material

emancipation” (Dangarembga 87). What Tambu comes to realize, though, is that what she deems fortunate leaves Nyasha faltering. Nyasha’s rebellion is first represented by her attitude towards her parents. The passivity of her mother in her objection to Nyasha reading the romance novel gives a nice contrast to her father’s stern opposition. “Even as Nyasha manifests the ills of colonialism, her gendered identity is also constantly in torment. Seeking the respect of her father and desiring a more respectable position for her mother than she sees possible, Nyasha at the same time hates her parents and herself for all their inadequacies” (Nair 137). Of all people Nyasha should be the most liberated since it appears that all struggles for empowerment are avoided just because of the family into which she is born. Tambu quickly learns otherwise by sharing a room with her.

During their first conversation while alone at the mission, Nyasha immediately opens up to Tambu. In reference to the years she and her brother spent in England, Nyasha shares, “We shouldn’t have gone The parents ought to have packed us off home Maybe that would have been best. For them at least, because now they’re stuck with hybrids for children. And they don’t like it It offends them. They think we do it on purpose I can’t help having been there and grown into the me that has been there But it offends them. I offend them” (Dangarembga 78). Nyasha is well aware of the source of her struggle, but knowing exactly how to deal with it keeps her in constant conflict with herself and her parents. Janice E. Hill details Nyasha’s victimization in “Purging A Plate Full of Colonial History: The *Nervous Conditions* of Silent Girls.” She states, “From the time Nyasha is first introduced, her speech and dress are continually characterized as Westernized, and this is nearly always censured as disrespectful or morally indecent By appropriating attitudes of the ‘mother country,’ Nyasha underscores ways in which her own native, colonial government mimics but can never duplicate England, for

Southern Rhodesia is inferior in a stratified imperial system” (83). Nyasha mimics this colonial superiority in the way she freely disrespects her mother, an issue about which Tambu scolds her, and labels her mother with having a negative attitude. “Having imbibed Western culture to a certain level during her parents’ residence in Britain, she . . . experiences the typical conflict of a culture clash. Nyasa [*sic*] goes through the experiences of frustration and powerlessness of being female. She regrets her unappreciated questioning mind and, what is more, the lack of strong female solidarity against male power” (Uwakweh 82). It is this mindset of believing in the female resistance against male domination that gives her the determination to stand up against her father’s authority.

The turning point for Nyasha in her quest for identity amidst her life of assimilation is the fight she has with Babamukuru. Her father’s fear of external perception certainly gives Nyasha the right to take up for herself when he hits her, but his position as the male leaves her physically and emotionally beaten down. This is also the first time Tambu finds a true connection with Nyasha. She shares:

I [felt] bad for her and [thought] how dreadfully familiar that scene had been, with Babamukuru condemning Nyasha to whoredom, making her a victim of her femaleness, just as I had felt victimised at home in the days when Nhamo went to school and I grew my maize. The victimization, I saw, was universal. It didn’t depend on poverty, on lack of education or on tradition. It didn’t depend on any of the things I thought it depended on. Men took it everywhere with them . . . I didn’t like . . . the way all conflicts came back to this question of femaleness. Femaleness as opposed and inferior to maleness. (Dangarembga 115-6)

Young Tambu understands a bit of Nyasha's quandary, but the older, more mature narrator Tambu admits, "[I]n those days it was easy for me to leave tangled thoughts knotted, their loose ends hanging" (Dangarembga 116). Nyasha's lack of any sort of moral sustenance drives her deeper into despair:

Her nervous condition leads to both physical and psychological degeneration because she lacks the necessary nourishment to sustain her growth in society. In Nyasha's plight, therefore, Dangarembga seems to project this social implication: that the female quest for awareness, and resistance to traditional female subordination, cannot be sustained if it lacks the necessary support base, such as the communal bonding of females against a common dominant power. (Uwakweh 82)

Nyasha is dually plagued with disempowerment from both the dominance of patriarchy and the "sanctity" brought by colonization, leaving her to see no other choice but to isolate. Tambu states, "I was closer to her than anybody else and so I sensed the conflict that she was going through of self versus surrender and the content of sin I worried about the effect the situation was having on my cousin. Not only had she stopped talking to us, but she was growing vague and detaching herself from us. She was retreating into some private world that we could not reach" (Dangarembga 118). The result is a burdened, victimized child who privately rebels as a way to gain some type of control over her disempowering circumstances.

The day before Tambu leaves for Sacred Heart, Nyasha shares a connection between her father's quest for dominance and her eating disorder. "I guess he's right, right to dislike me. It's not his fault, it's me. But I can't help it. Really I can't. He makes me so angry. I can't just shut up when he puts on his God act" (Dangarembga 190). She uses her eating disorder as her own

personal method of rebellion because this helps to maintain family peace, making her father think he has complete control:

When Babamukuru connects obedience to the eating of food, the effect on Nyasha is loss of appetite, an emotional strategy that will become increasingly effective for her and develop systematically into anorexia and bulimia. By saying 'I'm full,' Nyasha shifts the site of battle from the dining table controlled by Babamukuru to the territory of her own body, which she controls. Her refusal to eat food becomes a weapon of power in an otherwise powerless situation. (Hill 82)

Though she goes to great lengths to achieve it, Nyasha sees the need for liberation through empowerment at any cost. Nyasha does not even flinch when Maiguru leaves the mission as a statement to Babamukuru of her own need for liberation. Tambu reacts to her lackadaisical response by asserting, "Personally, I thought Nyasha was a little unbalanced not to be distressed by being abandoned so abruptly. Nyasha, though, didn't know what I was talking about. She did not think her mother had deserted her. She thought there was a difference between people deserting their daughters and people saving themselves" (Dangarembga 173-4). Nyasha views her eating disorder as a way of saving herself from the repercussions of her father's will to dominate and her determination to have a voice. Because she clandestinely rebels, father and daughter can both win the ensuing battle.

Nyasha is aware of her male-privileged society and is confident that she has no, nor ever will have a, voice unless she chooses to suppress her identity by conforming to what is expected of her. "As an African girl in a colonized country, Nyasha is expected to be silent and obedient" (Hill 83). In reference to Babamukuru and her struggle with submission, she tells Tambu,

“Sometimes I look at things from his point of view, you know what I mean, traditions and expectations and authority, that sort of thing, and I can see what he means and I try to be considerate and patient and obedient, really I do. But then I start thinking that he ought to look at things from my point of view and be considerate and patient with me, so I start fighting back and off we go again” (Dangarembga 190). Dangarembga never provides a clear resolution to Nyasha’s conflict and uses her alienation to illustrate how “knowing one’s history in order to find one’s identity and to achieve one’s destiny” (Deena 10) is imperative for purposes of finding true liberation. This is a definite advantage that Tambu has, yet she never disregards the seriousness of Nyasha’s struggle. Tambu proves her faithfulness to Nyasha regardless of her inconsistencies and, amidst trying to find a label and a cure for her illness, admits, “If Nyasha who had everything could not make it, where could I expect to go? I could not bear to think about it, because at that time we were not sure whether she would survive. All I knew was that the doctor would not commit himself. Nyasha’s progress was still in balance, and so, as a result, was mine” (Dangarembga 202).

Maiguru is Devoted to her Passions

In “Fighting the Good Fight: What Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* Says About Language and Power,” Gillian Gorle asserts that “[t]he power of language to upset, uproot, and either shackle or set free is demonstrated with devastating clarity” (181). Nyasha attempts self-expression through her rebellion and Tambu believes her liberation will come with education, but it is Maiguru who best illustrates this “power of language” concept discussed by Gorle. In the only private conversation Tambu has with her aunt, Maiguru implicitly shares her role in the success of their family. To assure Tambu that she contributes much more than just “looking after” her husband, Maiguru exclaims, “Your uncle wouldn’t be able to do half the

things he does if I didn't work as well!" (Dangarembga 101). It is during this conversation that Tambu becomes sympathetic toward Maiguru and surprised to find her deprived of a lifestyle where her full potential is not being cultivated regardless of her advantages.

Maiguru expresses her decision to stay in the backdrop as one of a satisfying sacrifice. "[N]o one even thinks about the things I gave up But that's how it goes, Sisi Tambu! And when you have a good man and lovely children, it makes it all worth while" (Dangarembga 102). Christopher Okonkwo supports this notion of Maiguru's extreme submissiveness regardless of her opportunities for liberation due to her wealth and education in "Space Matters: Form and Narrative in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*." He references the day Tambu moves to the mission to begin her education and her notice of the missing pane in the kitchen window. Tambu says that it was "particularly annoying to Maiguru" (Dangarembga 67), a keen connection Okonkwo makes with the male-dominated society in Rhodesia. He states:

[T]he fact that Maiguru does not fix the windows herself, or demand that they get repaired, that the oppressive male/patriarchal ideology and attitude coded in that *damage* be changed, is a major authorial commentary on gender self-(dis)empowerment. Maiguru's troubling inaction . . . insinuates her acquiescence to Babamukuru's culture-supported male leadership and dominion and, hence, signifies her indirect complicity in her subordination. (59)

Maiguru's passivity is evident to young Tambu as is her oppression, something that will not forever be suppressed. Tambu admits, "Personally I thought it was a great shame that Maiguru had been deprived of the opportunity to make the most of herself, even if she had accepted that deprivation. I was all for people being given opportunities" (Dangarembga 102).

Maiguru is a product of her husband's own submissiveness to the embedded colonial power, making her disempowerment inevitable. "Babamukuru is a powerful African, but he operates within a missionary and colonial system that circumscribes and apportioned the power he holds, so others' sense of his worth is often directly connected to his willingness to stay within the boundaries in which he wields the power granted to him by Whites" (Hill 84). In her conversation with Tambu, Maiguru appears satisfied with her role as the wind beneath her husband's wings, only making his colonized worth and power shine ever brighter amidst her own victimization. "Maiguru, Babamukuru's reticent but highly educated wife, settles for marriage and social stability in spite of the cost to her own professional aspirations, although she does start rising to challenges towards the end of the novel" (Gorle 181). Tolerance for oppression is temporal, and its release is unavoidable in one's desire for power and identity.

Maiguru's sudden boldness is priceless. She passionately states, "Let me tell you, Babawa Chido, I am tired of my house being a hotel for your family. I am tired of being a housekeeper for them. I am tired of being nothing in a home I am working myself sick to support Let me tell you, I have had enough!" (Dangarembga 172). Her release comes and results in breaking the cycle of disempowerment as expressed in the novel's title. "Dangarembga seems to suggest that patriarchy . . . heightened by the contradictions of colonial experience, creates the nervous state or psychological condition which afflicts the female characters in varying degrees of intensity. As a metaphor, 'nervous conditions' appropriately expresses the double predicament of the woman in African societies" (Uwakweh 78). Maiguru comes to terms with her nervous conditions by fervently sharing her opinion and doing what no educated, wealthy woman would dare do in walking out on her family. Her motivation proves itself useful, something even Tambu notices. "Maiguru had been away for only five days, but the change had

done her good. She smiled more often and less mechanically, fussed over us less and was more willing or able to talk about sensible things” (Dangarembga 175). What Tambu does not know at the time is that Maiguru’s behavior will eventually serve to benefit and heal her own nervous conditions.

Maiguru’s act of liberation proves how one voice can resonate loudly enough to impact fellow disempowered females. Maiguru is inadvertently preparing to serve as Tambu’s Savior when she speaks her mind to Babamukuru. Gillian Gorle explores Maiguru’s journey to liberation and states, “The fact that Maiguru has marshaled the courage to disagree with Babamukuru . . . bodes well for her future. Although the novel’s opening paragraph writes of her ‘entrapment’ . . . she has found the key to her trap and may well use it again” (190). Maiguru takes full advantage of her voice, which is now heard in her home, and uses it to advocate for Tambu. When Baba asks for her input concerning the prospect of Tambu attending Sacred Heart, she does not hesitate. Baba surprisingly responds by saying, “Speak freely, Mai. Say whatever you are thinking” (Dangarembga 180). Tambu is sure that “Maiguru’s speech has some effect” (Dangarembga 182) as she awaits her uncle’s final decision. Maiguru’s language of words and actions unquestionably holds the power to set generations of women free. Because of one woman who truly understands what plagues other Shona women, Tambu is afforded the opportunity to take her success and education to a level she never fathomed.

Tambu is Dynamic in her Persistence

Patchay, quoting Jane Bryce, states, “Tambu’s journey is not one that progresses from ‘entrapment [to] rebellion [to] escape’; rather it is a journey of circularity that includes ‘retrieval, [a] rediscovery and reinvention”” (153). Tambu always knew her capabilities and her limitations, creating within her a vision for more than the disempowerment a life without education had to

offer. Upon moving to the mission with infinite enthusiasm and anxious to be submerged into her studies, Tambu asserts:

Thus began the period of my reincarnation. I liked to think of my transfer to the mission as my reincarnation I expected this era to be significantly profound and broadening in terms of adding wisdom to my nature, clarity to my vision, glamour to my person Freed from the constraints of the necessary and the squalid that defined and delimited our activity at home, I invested a lot of robust energy in approximating to my idea of a young woman of the world.

(Dangarembga 92-3)

Tambu invites her victimization to mold her vision in a way that can only guide her toward the destiny she has determined for herself. Though she loves her poverty-stricken family and her sick cousin, Tambu refuses to let their personal oppression become her own. She is certain that her fate is to study at Sacred Heart and asks, “[W]as I—Tambudzai, lately of the mission and before that the homestead—was I Tambudzai, so recently a peasant, was I not entering as I had promised myself I would, a world where burdens lightened with every step, soon to disappear altogether?” (Dangarembga 191). Tambu is prepared for the “novelty” and “discovery” (Dangarembga 197) not only Sacred Heart but the rest of her life has to offer. She is the embodiment of “[t]he female voice [that] promises a fresh insight on women’s reality and experiences that are generally inaccessible to the male tradition. Significantly, [she] debunks the patriarchal social structure and demystifies the idealized traditional images of the African woman” (Uwakweh 76).

CHAPTER FOUR: PURPLE HIBISCUS

Nobody can teach me who I am. You can describe parts of me, but who I am - and what I need - is something I have to find out myself.

Chinua Achebe

Fear, structure, insecurity, and violence define the postcolonial burden young Kambili Achike attempts to bear each day. Unlike Tambu who receives her heart's desires as a result of a tragedy, Kambili is born with a silver spoon in her mouth. She strives to please her father, an unachievable task, but does not realize the extent of her oppression until she spends time with her extended family. Kambili even admits that "Nsukka started it all" (Adichie, *Purple* 16) and immediately flashes back to her journey of deliverance in *Purple Hibiscus*. Through Kambili the novel serves to personify the instability and unrest of postcolonial Nigeria. Heather Hewitt explicates Kambili's oppressive plight and hopeful progression in "Coming of Age: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and the Voice of the Third Generation." She states, "Kambili must move from voicelessness and silence toward voice and healing . . . Kambili must literally 'remember' herself—she must end her alienation from her own voice and body—by putting together a coherent narrative of her past and present" (84). But her narrative is as much about her struggles as it is about her deliverance. When she and Jaja return home from Nsukka on the day before Palm Sunday, Jaja makes a prophetic observation and states, "See, the purple hibiscuses are about to bloom" (Adichie, *Purple* 253). What Kambili does not know is that everything she has felt, seen, and heard in the past few weeks in Nsukka will "bloom" the next day with Jaja's rebellion. After he refuses to go to communion and Eugene's rage occurs, the no longer timid Kambili shares, "Aunty Ifeoma's little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja's defiance seemed to me now like Aunty Ifeoma's experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one

the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government Square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do” (Adichie, *Purple* 16). What leads Kambili to this liberating moment is far from the harmonious symbolism of a garden but rather the pernicious entrapment of a legalistic father.

Things Fall Apart

Kambili is conditioned according to the standards set by imperial powers through her father. The beliefs practiced by Eugene are so extreme that they tend to burden the believer instead of bring the intended grace and freedom. For example, when Auntie Ifeoma arrives to pick up Jaja and Kambili, she insists that Kambili wear shorts. Kambili neglects to tell her that she “did not own any trousers because it was sinful for a woman to wear trousers” (Adichie, *Purple* 80). It is this warped definition of redemption that leaves Kambili struggling to even be aware of her own voice. It is the condemning patriarchy hovering over the Achike household that forces Jaja’s rebellion, causing things to fall apart. But Adichie does not use these words in the first line of her novel by accident, for they are inspired by Chinua Achebe and used as an inspiration for Adichie to address Africa through a postcolonial lens.

Achebe illustrates the damaging effects of colonization directly on culture and tradition in his highly acclaimed *Things Fall Apart*. In the eyes of traditional natives like Okonkwo, things definitely begin to fall apart when his son Nwoye converts to Christianity. Sons are an honor, and such rebellion gives them the reputation of being weak. The same idea of breaking the expectations of family honor holds true with Jaja’s rebellion against Christianity. Kambili shares, “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” (Adichie, *Purple* 3). With colonization’s religion fully embedded into the Igbo culture, anything other is blasphemous. Jane Bryce makes this connection between the two works in “Half and Half

Children’: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel,” yet she claims that Adichie’s novel is more focused on the effects of a colonized home instead of the actual act of colonization. She states, “*Purple Hibiscus* takes the form of a bildungsroman set in a society in which attitudes have hardened, where violence that was external has become entrenched in the family. The opening sentence signals its entanglement with Achebe and his project of reclamation, but relocates it firmly in the home” (58). Through narration Kambili proves how she personifies the conflict of colonization within Nigeria, with the fears, oppression, and insecurities it causes among those held inferior.

The plot in Achebe’s novel explains how things fall apart through the lens of a pure culture and people. On the contrary Adichie’s idea of things falling apart gives hope in the midst of entrapment, mirroring what is in store for Nigeria. In “*Oran a-azu nwa: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels*,” Madelaine Hron asserts:

Set in Nigeria . . . *Purple Hibiscus* ostensibly examines the clash of civilizations characterizing contemporary Nigeria: between Western and traditional values, between urban and rural settings, or between public and private spheres. Though Adichie’s novel begins with a recognizable allusion to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* . . . and so seemingly sets up the collision between traditional and imported religions or the father-son conflict that drives Achebe’s text, Adichie resists any simple binaries, so as to explore the complex and contradictory aspects of postcolonial Nigerian society. (30)

With Kambili as the narrator, the reader is given an intimate perspective of the load victims of a postcolonial society are forced to carry. But by the novel’s end, Kambili is making plans for a new beginning as she talks with her mother about their plans when Jaja is released from prison.

“‘We will take Jaja to Nsukka first, and then we’ll go to America to visit Aunty Ifeoma,’ I say. ‘We’ll plant new orange trees in Abba when we come back, and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I’ll plant ixora so we can suck the juices of the flowers.’ I am laughing. I reach out and place my arm around Mama’s shoulder and she leans toward me and smiles” (Adichie, *Purple* 306-7). Kambili no longer lives as a victim of a male-dominated household and is certain of her liberated future. “As a bildungsroman, a sub-genre that centers around self-empowerment, self-development, and the pivotal act of claiming one’s voice, Adichie’s novel resonates with a wide-range of coming-of-age stories” (Hewett 87). So when things begin to fall apart after Jaja’s rebellion, it is no wonder that Kambili compares it with the sweetness of a flower and the sounds of emancipation.

The Power of Mimicry

Eugene Achike has developed a thwarted view of religion from the missionaries, causing him to believe that the way of the colonizer is the sole route to redemption. He even lauds his father-in-law by telling Kambili that “[h]e did things the right way, the way the white people did, not what our people do now!” (Adichie, *Purple* 68). And while on their visit to Abba during Christmas, Kambili admits, “Papa liked it when the villagers made an effort to speak English around him. He said it showed they had good sense” (Adichie, *Purple* 60). Eugene has denied his entire Igbo heritage and has completely assimilated to the point of not knowing how to build relationships within his home without control and violence. Simply stated, legalism stands in his way, and his expectations for his family greatly exceed their capabilities. “The central conflict in Adichie’s novel revolves around the ‘failed transplantation’ of Eugene, Kambili’s father, a figure who, for the adult reader, embodies repressive patriarchy, imported Western religion, or colonial

mimicry. However, the child Kambili, nurtured by her father's values, must reconcile the various aspects of her beloved Papa's character" (Hron 31).

It was at a young age that Eugene was intentionally exposed to white ways, and Papa-Nnukwu is sure that Eugene's current behavior and attitudes are the result of it. Papa-Nnukwu tells Aunty Ifeoma, "My son owns that house that can fit in every man in Abba, and yet many times I have nothing to put on my plate. I should not have let him follow those missionaries," (Adichie, *Purple* 83). The reason for Eugene's attraction to colonial ways as a child is not detailed in the text and leaves the reader only to infer. Renowned poet Derek Walcott addresses possible rationales behind colonization and its victims in "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" arguing that "[p]erhaps powerlessness leaves the Third World, the ex-colonial world, no alternative but to imitate those systems offered to or forced on it by the major power, their political systems which must alter their common life, their art, their language, their philosophy" (5). Perhaps Papa Nnukwu views sending his children to follow the missionaries as the only way to a better life. Aunty Ifeoma assures her father that it was not the influence of the missionaries that made Eugene like he is since she was also just as exposed. "'*Nna anyi,*' Aunty Ifeoma said. 'It was not the missionaries. Did I not go to the missionary school, too?'" (Adichie, *Purple* 83). But there is no other theory to support any other reasoning. Walcott asserts that "the bitterness of the colonial experience . . . tempts the Third World with spiritual alternatives. These alternatives will be violent, the total rejection through revolution Large sections of the population of this earth have nothing to lose after their history of slavery, colonialism, famine, economic exploitation, patronage, contempt" (5). It can easily be concluded that Papa Nnukwu is ultimately to blame for Eugene's colonial exposure, but Eugene himself is at fault for the behavior he exhibits towards his family in its aftermath.

Courtesy of colonization, Eugene attempts to begin a cycle of “repressive patriarchy” and “colonial mimicry” within his family. His attempts to translate his own assimilation end in violence and domination, an exact copy of imperialism on the African. In reference to those who have experienced such mimicry, Walcott asserts, “To mimic, one needs a mirror, and . . . our pantomime is conducted before a projection of ourselves which in its smallest gestures is based on metropolitan references. No gesture, according to this philosophy, is authentic, every sentence is a quotation, every movement either ambitious or pathetic, and because it is mimicry, uncreative” (6). Eugene outlandishly imitates the regulations of his colonial religion throughout the novel. One very ironic example is his condemnation of Father Amadi for singing in Igbo during his sermon. Papa pompously comments to his family, “That young priest, singing in the sermon like a Godless leader of one of these Pentecostal churches that spring up everywhere like mushrooms. People like him bring trouble to the church. We must remember to pray for him” (Adichie, *Purple* 29). Eugene is definitely foreshadowing the transformation that will occur in Kambili through this young priest, but his frustration comes with Father Amadi’s lack of colonial mimicry. Father Amadi has found a connection between colonization’s religion and his own culture, causing one to complement the other. To Eugene his culture and what colonization has to offer should run parallel. Eugene is certain to instill his mirror of mimicry within his children, insisting that any mix of Igbo and Christianity is sacrilegious.

Mimicry becomes generational when Eugene’s rigid Christian beliefs leave Kambili judgmental toward traditional Igbo beliefs as well. As she and Jaja visit Papa-Nnukwu’s compound during Christmas, Kambili reminisces of her first visit there. “I had examined him that day, too, looking away when his eyes met mine, for signs of difference, of Godlessness. I didn’t see any, but I was sure they were there somewhere. They had to be” (Adichie, *Purple* 63).

Kambili's quick assumption is obviously based on the premise that she rebukes any influence of the Igbo culture, a mirror of her father's beliefs. In "Ideology in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003)," Daria Tunca asserts:

At first, because [Kambili] embraces every position [Eugene] takes without questioning his motivations, she reproduces his value-laden linguistic choice. Her narrative contains emphatic pronouncements evocative of her father's rhetoric [I]n the early stages of the narrative, Kambili finds herself unable to bridge the chasm between the ideology her father has instilled into her and her own visual experiences. (126)

Kambili is a product of colonial mimicry in every form, and, due to its rigid expectations, she is almost incapable of functioning in normal society. "Even though Kambili is unable to support her beliefs with concrete evidence, her convictions are still unshaken at this stage" (Tunca 126).

Kambili's Silence

Prior to her transformation, Kambili's quiet fall to disempowerment affects her socially, leaving her unable to communicate with anyone other than herself. Her attempt at finding a place among others leaves her unsure and nervous. After Kambili comes in second to Chinwe Jideze on her report card, Eugene walks Kambili into school to teach her a lesson about the competition. Her classmate Ezinne questions this, leaving Kambili stuttering her answer. "'I...I...' I stopped to take a breath because I knew I would stutter even more if I didn't. 'He wanted to see my class'" (Adichie, *Purple* 49). Kambili realizes that she is "awkward and tongue-tied" (Adichie, *Purple* 49) yet still blind at this point to her victimization. "Kambili's silences, then, are not absolute When she tries to speak, her throat tightens and words will not come out; she fears her father's reprisals, his unspoken commands that she not tell others their secrets Estranged

from her own speech and the workings of her throat and tongue, Kambili's linguistic alienation underscores her personal isolation" (Hewett 85). This internal, private oppression leaves her with the reputation of a snob at school and afraid to make a wrong move at home.

This same lack of a literal voice is also seen in Kambili when she visits her extended family in Nsukka. Her cousin Amaka initially plays the part of her foil, being blunt with her about her (Kambili's) awkward behavior. Candid Amaka quickly addresses Kambili's peculiar social skills and does so almost immediately upon her arrival to Nsukka. She asks Kambili, "Why do you lower your voice? . . . You lower your voice when you speak. You talk in whispers" (Adichie, *Purple* 117). But Amaka does not stop there. She is tactless in her emphasis of Kambili's materially advantaged and overly structured life back in Enugu. This tactic should force Kambili to at least lash out at Amaka, it being an obviously uncomfortable situation for Kambili, but instead it still leaves her speechless. Amaka asks, "Is this how you wash plates in your house Or is plate washing not included in your fancy schedule" (Adichie, *Purple* 140). Kambili admits, "I stood there, staring at her, wishing Aunty Ifeoma were there to speak for me" (Adichie, *Purple* 141). On the same day when Amaka's friends visit, Kambili does not have the skills needed to communicate with them. When the friends compliment Kambili's hair, she confesses, "I wanted to talk with them, to laugh with them so much that I would start to jump up and down in one place the way they did, but my lips held stubbornly together. I did not want to stutter, so I started to cough and then ran out and into the toilet" (Adichie, *Purple* 141).

Her silence stands as a metaphor of postcolonial Nigeria. The battle between imperialism and culture leaves them both victimized and voiceless. "Kambili is a silenced agent who must claim her voice; and in bearing witness to her own life, she tells a greater story about the nature of tyranny in postcolonial Nigeria. The challenge, at the end, is for Kambili to articulate the

‘different silence’ of the present (293) . . . [L]ike Nigeria itself, she now must find her way forward—slowly, resolutely, indefatigably—into the future” (Hewett 90). Her relief comes in Nsukka, but the road to this relief is tiring and heavy. And it is through her inability to cope with the simple aspects of life, those that come easily for most people, that she begins to realize the weight of her oppression. Kambili is so afraid of even thinking for herself that something as simple as going to the stadium with Father Amadi is a terrifying experience. While Auntie Ifeoma assures Kambili that she will have fun, Kambili is amazed at such confidence. Her recognition of her own disempowerment and struggle is evident in this statement: “[Auntie Ifeoma] seemed so happy, so at peace, and I wondered how anybody around me could feel that way when liquid fire was raging inside me, when fear was mingling with hope and clutching itself around my ankles” (Adichie, *Purple* 174). Kambili begins to realize that the person whom she most idolizes is what is causing her the most conflict, so she uses her time in Nsukka to feed the raging, internal revolution that will hopefully release the pressure of her victimization.

Though Kambili is a child and is initially unaware that her life is one of mimicry, her personal struggle can be paralleled with Ralph Singh’s in V.S. Naipaul’s *The Mimic Men*. Singh’s life has been inundated with the effects of British colonization, and he is fully aware that his Indian heritage has been suppressed as a result. Of his struggle with British mimicry, he states, “I had tried to give myself a personality. It was something I had tried more than once before, and waited for the response in the eyes of others. But now I no longer knew what I was; ambition became confused, then faded; and I found myself longing for the certainties of my life on the island of Isabella, certainties which I had once dismissed as shipwreck” (Naipaul 32). Kambili is oblivious to all “certainties of life” until she visits her own island of Isabella—Nsukka. This is where she finds her Igbo roots and begins to establish an identity apart from the

imperialism learned from her father. “Unlike her father, who denies his roots, Kambili only grows and flourishes like the purple hibiscus, when she learns to draw on her roots and cultivate her hybridity. It is only when Kambili herself learns to cook and prepare traditional Igbo dishes [at Auntie Ifeoma’s] that she breaks away from the fabricated sweetness of her childhood and gains agency as a woman” (Hron 35).

Finding Her Voice

Kambili experiences culture shock during her visit to Nsukka. She admits, “Laughter always rang out in Auntie Ifeoma’s house, and no matter where the laughter came from, it bounced around all the walls, all the rooms. Arguments rose quickly and fell just as quickly. Morning and night prayers were always peppered with songs, Igbo praise songs that usually called for hand clapping” (Adichie, *Purple* 140). Accustomed to the silence of her home as Papa takes naps, as she and Jaja fulfill their schedules, and even as the family eats, Kambili is initially uncomfortable with the relaxed, vocally-charged environment she experiences in her aunt’s home. Kambili is amazed even at the dinner table etiquette. She states, “Laughter floated over my head. Words spurted from everyone, often not seeking and not getting any response. We always spoke with a purpose back home, especially at the table, but my cousins seemed to simply speak and speak and speak” (Adichie, *Purple* 120). The culture shock begins to diminish as quickly as the first night of her visit, planting a seed of awareness within Kambili.

The control Eugene has over Kambili is so ingrained that she determines to follow his rules even when he is not present and they have been overruled by Auntie Ifeoma. “Kambili is a confused child, who idolizes her father and only recognizes his fixed point of view” (Hron 33). As early as that first night in Nsukka, Kambili becomes aware of her awkwardness yet determines to adhere to her father’s absent authority. She admits, “I felt as if my shadow were

visiting Aunty Ifeoma and her family, while the real me was studying in my room in Enugu, my schedule posted above me Even though I did not have the schedule, I knew what time Papa had penciled in for bed. I fell off to sleep wondering when Amaka would come in, if her lips would turn down at the corners in a sneer when she looked at me sleeping” (Adichie, *Purple* 125-6). With all she experiences during that first day in Nsukka, Kambili realizes she is not “normal,” causing her to be self-conscious about Amaka’s perception of her. Ironically, it is the attention she will pay to her “heathen” grandfather, as well as the attention the Igbo-singing priest will pay to her while in Nsukka, that waters the seeds of empowerment planted within her by Aunty Ifeoma’s family.

Eugene’s legalism and bigoted assimilation has bred children of the same caliber. “Through Kambili’s eyes, we come to see how an entire family has adapted to life under a rigid and unpredictable patriarch, and we understand how unbridled power can cause both physical and psychological destruction” (Hewett 80). Aunty Ifeoma is not naïve of the fact that her brother has ingrained an inaccurate depiction of his traditional beliefs, and even of his own father, so she does not hesitate to correct Kambili’s attitudes concerning the issue. After refusing an opportunity to visit Papa-Nnukwu in his compound, Aunty Ifeoma educates Kambili and boldly proclaims, “Your Papa-Nnukwu is not a pagan, Kambili, he is a traditionalist” (Adichie, *Purple* 81). Still not convinced, young Kambili is not ready to release her imbedded legalism and ponders, “I stared at her. Pagan, traditionalist, what did it matter? He was not Catholic, that was all; he was not of faith. He was one of the people whose conversion we prayed for so that they did not end in the everlasting torment of hellfire” (Adichie, *Purple* 81). It is on this day that Kambili is exposed to an ideal much different from her own; it is on this day that she spends quality time with her “pagan” grandfather; it is on this day that Kambili opens herself up to the

other side. She admits, “That night, I dreamed that I was laughing, but it did not sound like my laughter, although I was not sure what my laughter sounded like. It was cackling and throaty and enthusiastic, like Aunty Ifeoma’s” (Adichie, *Purple* 88).

Kambili’s fresh perspective concerning Papa-Nnukwu is fed by the relationship she forms with the young priest. It is the same priest that Eugene compares with a “Godless leader,” openly rebuking his style with its incorporation of Igbo. In “Breaking Gods: An African Postcolonial Gothic Reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*,” Lily G. Mabura discusses the effects of Father Amadi’s style. She argues, “The appearance of a young newly ordained reformist Igbo priest, Father Amadi, reintroduces past anxieties and fears for people like Father Benedict and Eugene as they are against his reclamation of Igbo language and song” (212). Their personal alienation has brainwashed them by the notion that Western imperialism is the dominating idea and anything other is sinful. “The feeling of inferiority of the colonized is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority” (Fanon 93). And to prevent feelings of inferiority and disadvantages that are the result of colonization, those like Eugene must assimilate or else be dominated. But the Father Amadi that Kambili experiences in Nsukka is not the one of godlessness or disobedience that her father has assumed him to be. “Father Amadi’s threat . . . is not that easily done away with and despite Eugene’s efforts, it lodges itself in Kambili and Jaja and can be said to contribute to their ensuing revolt” (Mabura 213). Kambili experiences a new form of postcolonial religion through Father Amadi, evidenced at her convicting discomfort when he is around.

Adichie never clearly reveals the intention of the relationship between Father Amadi and Kambili, yet it can easily be inferred that both see each other in a special way. For Father Amadi it may just be his priestly duty to take Kambili to the stadium and pay her extra attention,

especially after admitting that he is somewhat aware of Eugene's abuse. Regardless, it is much needed attention for Kambili because it is nonjudgmental, unstructured, and nonviolent. She is aware of Father Amadi's sincerity but is not quite sure how to respond to it. Kambili admits, "Hearing my name in his voice, in that melody, made me feel taut inside" (Adichie, *Purple* 148). Yet with all the ludicrous beliefs her father has instilled within her, she discloses her uncertainty of Father Amadi's position as a priest. Kambili states, "I could not help staring at him, because his voice pulled me and because I did not know a priest could play football. It seemed so ungodly, so common" (Adichie, *Purple* 148). She does not have a condemning perspective when referring to Father Amadi, unlike her views about her grandfather. There is something about this young priest, regardless of her father's disapproval of him, that causes Kambili to immediately trust him, furtively pulling her away from her usual lifestyle of mimicry.

A major crossroads for Kambili is the trip she takes with Father Amadi to the stadium. It is around this time that Kambili is watching the special relationship Amaka has with Papa-Nnukwu, slowly coming to realize her own personal void. With the battle between what she views as sin and her desire for personal empowerment, a clear symbol of the contrast between her father and the young priest, Kambili admits, "I was always penitent when I was close to a priest at confession. But it was hard to feel penitent now, with Father Amadi's cologne deep in my lungs. I felt guilty instead because I could not focus on my sins, could not think of anything except how near he was. 'I sleep in the same room as my grandfather. He is a heathen,' I blurted out" (Adichie, *Purple* 175). Though Father Amadi is a priest, there could be another reason that Kambili feels compelled to confess. She may very well see this as an opportunity to get an outside perspective about how she views her grandfather, one that may possibly confirm Auntie Ifeoma's:

Father Amadi, who belongs to the order of The Fathers of the Blessed Way (unlike Father Benedict . . . who belong[s] to the Holy Ghost Fathers) seems to advocate for a new direction or an amendment of Catholic evangelical strategy in Igboland. He seems symbolically set up for this role from his seat at St. Peter's Catholic Chaplaincy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. His association with the name St. Peter connotes that he is the rock on which the new is to be founded. (Mabura 214)

Whether it is the smell of his cologne, the way he looks at Kambili, or how she feels when he says her name, Father Amadi represents vitality, solidity, and liberation to Kambili. Through him she becomes aware that life is more than worshipping in English or keeping a schedule. This young priest gives Kambili something that her father never has. On the way back from the stadium, she admits, "I laughed. It sounded strange, as if I were listening to the recorded laughter of a stranger being played back. I was not sure I had ever heard myself laugh" (Adichie, *Purple* 179).

Father Amadi shows Kambili a different side of religion, and through that perspective she begins to view her grandfather in a different, softer light. She inevitably grows a strong bond with him, a bond that will, unfortunately, never be reciprocated. Kambili observes the special relationship between him and Amaka while she paints him and admits, "Amaka and Papa-Nnukwu spoke sometimes, their voices low, twining together. They understood each other, using the sparest words. Watching them, I felt a longing for something I knew I would never have I pushed myself up and went into the kitchen; neither Papa-Nnukwu nor Amaka noticed when I left" (Adichie, *Purple* 165). Kambili knows that regardless of her ability to sit in the same room as her grandfather without feeling guilty, she will never form a unique relationship with him like

Amaka has. But just the fact that Kambili desires that relationship instead of denounces it illustrates an evolution of her identity.

Through the eyes of a “heathen” she begins to see the true definition of religion. Aunty Ifeoma wakes Kambili up early one morning to observe the reverence and sincerity of Papa-Nnukwu as he prays, probably hoping Kambili will soften her condemnation of those whose faith lies in something other than Catholicism. Kambili narrates, “‘Chineke! Bless my son, Eugene. Let the sun not set on his prosperity. Lift the curse they have put on him.’ Papa-Nnukwu leaned over and drew one more line. I was surprised that he prayed for Papa with the same earnestness that he prayed for himself and Aunty Ifeoma” (Adichie, *Purple* 168). Kambili expects to see what is practiced in her own home: a serious prayer to a damning God who shows no mercy toward those who do not refer to him by a certain name and in a certain language. Papa-Nnukwu’s traditionalist beliefs illustrate the opposite to Kambili. At the end of his ritual she shares, “He was still smiling as I quietly turned and went back to the bedroom. I never smiled after we said the rosary back home. None of us did” (Adichie, *Purple* 169). It is this man to whom her father limited her exposure; it is this man who represents the opposite of everything Kambili was raised to believe; it is this man who empowers young Kambili to stand up against a legalistic religion and abusive father, almost causing her death.

The final act of violence by Eugene against Kambili gives an amazing image of what the young narrator is willing to sacrifice for empowerment. Just the mere act of Amaka giving Kambili the unfinished portrait of Papa-Nnukwu serves as a metaphorical illustration of the progression in Kambili’s once burdened spirit. “After her grandfather dies, it is his image that she bears in mind as she is abused by her father. Ultimately it is because of a painting of Papa-Nnukwu that Kambili finally stands up to her father in defiance” (Hron 33). Kambili admits to

knowing Eugene's routine of going into her room to tell her good night, yet she still does not hide the picture. "Perhaps it was what we wanted to happen, Jaja and I, without being aware of it. Perhaps we all changed after Nsukka—even Papa—and things were destined to not be the same, to not be in their original order" (Adichie, *Purple* 209). Kambili is ready for that change, regardless of the consequences. "The picture symbolizes the growth of Kambili's world to include not only her forbidden grandfather but also her aunt her cousins, and Father Amadi; and with the expansion of her world, she has begun to question her father's omnipotence" (Hewett 83). This questioning comes at a steep price, but it may possibly be the long-awaited spark that begins the fire of rebellion within her family.

Kambili's release is evidenced in her conformity to the abuse. "Her silence signals her refusal to forget what she has seen: a different way of living, a family life which she 'had never had, would never have' (210)" (Hewett 83). While "[t]he metal buckles on [Eugene's] slippers stung like bites from giant mosquitoes" (Adichie, *Purple* 210), Kambili brilliantly associates the beat of his kicks with her newfound exposure. Kambili confesses, "The kicking increased in tempo, and I thought of Amaka's music, her culturally conscious music that sometimes started off with a calm saxophone and then whirled into lusty singing. I curled around myself tighter, around the pieces of the painting; they were soft, feathery" (Adichie, *Purple* 211). Kambili somehow finds a place of comfort during the abuse, signaling a rebellion against everything Eugene represents. This naïve, conforming teenager who has always striven to please her dominating, ridiculous father comes to realize that her life has been one of victimization, and she will not tolerate it anymore. The place Kambili goes during her father's incessant, brutal kicking is "a symbol of resistance against colonialism and an affirmation of traditional Nigerian culture" (Hewett 83). Kambili's brave act of curling around the pieces of the torn portrait of Papa-

Nnukwu illustrates a broken cycle and a shattered mimicry. Through it she infuriates her oppressor and begins a revolution against colonial disempowerment. Though the pain from “the metal land[ing] on open skin on [her] side, [her] back, [her] legs” (Adichie, *Purple* 211) is torturous, Kambili reigns as the victor in this battle, overpowering what has disempowered her far too long.

Kambili is Nigeria

On the final outing Kambili takes with her aunt and cousins upon her last trip to Nsukka, Amaka teases her about her athletic ability and Kambili shares, “I laughed. It seemed so easy now, laughter. So many things seemed easy now” (Adichie, *Purple* 284). Just as Jaja foreshadowed, the purple hibiscuses have definitely bloomed, and the cycle of victimization has been broken as a result. “As intimated by the title, *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie proffers the reader a noteworthy, new, hybridized species in this book. Symbolically, the reader is introduced to the rare purple hibiscus flower near a barbed wire fence; its stems are later transplanted to the city” (Hron 31). Kambili’s personal hybridization and transplantation are the subjects of the text, proving hope for a disempowered, entrapped victim. Kambili is confident in her journey to overcoming the greatest of adversities and believes she is heading towards freedom from her father’s victimization. But Kambili’s story is more than a story of a young girl overpowering the oppression of a physically and mentally abusive father. It is a symbol of the history of a people and a culture becoming reinvented and empowered. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie eloquently articulates one of her central beliefs, which definitely mirrors what Kambili stands for in *Purple Hibiscus*. In “African ‘Authenticity’ and the Biafran Experience” she shares:

[I]t is important that we recognize the equal humanity of the people with whom we inhabit this earth. There is no doubt that we are all equally human, but the

course of history has made it possible for some people to question the humanity of others, which has grave consequences for all of us. And so, we need to combat and challenge and complicate stereotypes. We need to conceive of a world in which the idea of difference is just that: difference, rather than something necessarily better or worse. (46)

For Kambili, as well as her country Nigeria, that combat and quest for equality comes at a steep price but is one worth fighting and almost dying for. Though the death of her father is a bitter sweet trial, she continues to praise her time in Nsukka, a symbol of her future and the future of her people. On the way to the see Jaja in prison, Kambili admits, “Nsukka could free something deep inside your belly that would rise up to your throat and come out as a freedom song. As laughter” (Adichie, *Purple* 299).

CONCLUSION

Though these stories are native to specific parts of the world, they aid in globally connecting women. For those females living in oppressed societies, telling their stories is the first rung in the ladder of lasting liberation not only for them but also for those who are afraid to be their own voice. Bronwyn Fredericks insists, “This form of articulating is part of . . . women’s resistance to the ongoing process and impacts of colonization and is part of our reempowering ourselves as . . . women. It is also about healing some of the deep soul wounds of colonization and contributing to the healing of others” (548). Though it is, undoubtedly, the source of much disempowerment, colonization cannot necessarily be blamed as the sole reason. Already infected sources such as religion and male-dominated societies also bring resistance and cause wounds in females. Regardless of the culprit, it is important that females recognize and share the specifics of what causes their disempowerment. It is through this process that all women will find a common connection, which will lead to individual strength and ultimately to an unwavering voice.

Pillars of Salt and *Dreams of Trespass* prove that disempowerment does not know age, as these texts close any generational gaps that could possibly surface. One text serves as a voice for mature women who have experienced life while the other illustrates the vulnerability of a child who has already recognized and begun to question her current and future rights. Maha, Um Saad, and Fatima are connected through their burdens of patriarchy and religion as well as their desire for an outlet to empowerment. Their ages and situations in no way negate the validity of their stories but rather emphasize the oppression of other women, an issue that has been silenced for far too long. “When reading some of the literature of government or establishment Islam and opposition Islam on women, one can see the deep mistrust and ‘fear’ of women. Women are

perceived as activist and dangerous and need to be contained” (Faqr, “Engendering” 171).

Though contained in a mental hospital, Maha and Um Saad do not end their stories there. The determination for victory is evidenced in the sisterhood that they develop. This same determination is illustrated in Fatima through the relationships she intentionally develops with women who have lived a lifestyle of disempowerment, a struggle she aims to halt for herself at her young age. Their stories are just the beginning for these females, opening a fresh new world for those who are brave enough to follow.

Different religions from the first two novels but the same struggles for empowerment are at the heart of *Nervous Conditions* and *Purple Hibiscus*. There are certain aspects to be compared with the protagonists in these texts. Tambu and Kambili are both teenage girls trapped in a male-dominated society, which also births within them a spirit of determination over their individual disempowerment. “Kambili’s internal growth parallels . . . Tambu Like Kambili, Tambu is a product of a Christian missionary education, and it is through exposure to her cousin Nyasha’s struggles that Tambu matures. She realizes that the world is not defined by good and evil, but shades of gray; and at the end of the story, Tambu is able to voice her own experiences” (Hewett 87). Kambili, just like Tambu, is exposed to the much different lifestyle from her cousins, helping her to also realize that there is more to life than the language one speaks or the clothes one wears. They both recognize that contentment does not just come in the form of a Westernized education or even lifestyle, for, in some ways, their cousins have both. But what they do learn is that one becomes empowered when progression is allowed, inviting the liberation of the oppressed. This liberation is an individual matter that everyone, regardless of culture or religion, deserves. It is what Jaja aims to prove in his rebellion against communion. “Jaja’s defiance, Kambili suggests, extends beyond the political struggle for democratic

freedoms; it is the cry for the right to exist as a human being” (Hewitt 90). And this is the common thread that runs throughout each novel and every character.

History is destined to cycle, but the cycle of female entrapment and victimization cannot be prevented unless it is expressed and understood. The suppression of it will only lead to more oppression, for “a denial of history leads to the loss of identity” (Deena 11). Women were created for more than the inferiority to which they often submit. Being cognizant of the progression they have made as well as the victimization that remains to be resolved are significant in leading all women to establish their intended identity. When women can identify themselves apart from their disempowerment and use that oppression to nurture their determination, they can be victorious. “Reempowerment . . . implies rebuilding and reviving . . . women’s spiritual and cultural practices accompanied by healing” (Fredericks 548). Healing disempowered women will never have a final solution, but there is hope in knowing that there are women who can sympathize, support, and strengthen because each has a story that deserves to and will eventually be heard.

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