



# The Gendered and Commodified Female Body in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction

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## Abstract

Although African feminist scholarship has grown diverse and dynamic over the years, it seems that little attention is paid to the discursive corporeality of the female body. It is often implied that discourses about the fate of the woman under a patriarchal system already caters for the body of the woman. There is however the need to stage or foreground the female body, by way of giving it much closer attention, its discursive formation, its use and abuse, its process of inscription, and its genderisation as it often fails to escape the exertions of patriarchy. Reading three contemporary Nigerian novels: Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*, Unoma Azuah's *Sky-High Flames*, and Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this article examines the representation of the female body in fictional narratives with specific focus on how the body is gendered, sexualized and commodified. The article argues that in the process of inscribing gender and sexuality on the body and commodifying it, the question of body aesthetics is thrown up – the ironic privileging of the beautiful body, the place of the ugly body, the implications of the deformed body, and the entire artificial way of making the body what it is not. The article, after an analysis of the gendered and commodified female body in the novels mentioned above, concludes that the body is a victim of patriarchal and institutional power that inscribes positions and prejudices on it and gestures it towards what one may call self-inferioritisation, although the novelists offer hope of self-emancipation.

## Résumé

Les études féministes africaines se sont diversifiées et dynamisées au fil des ans, mais il semble que peu d'attention ait été accordée à la corporalité discursive du corps féminin. Il est souvent sous-entendu que les discours sur

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le sort de la femme dans un système patriarcal prennent déjà en charge le corps de la femme. Il y a cependant nécessité de mise en scène ou de mise en avant, d'accorder beaucoup plus d'attention au corps féminin, à sa formation discursive, à son utilisation et aux mauvais traitements qui lui sont infligés, à son processus d'inscription et à sa sexo-spécification, car il n'échappe pas toujours au patriarcat. A travers trois romans nigériens contemporains: *The Descendants* de Zaynab Alkali, *Sky-High Flames* d'Unoma Azuah et *The secret life of Baba Segi's wives* de Lola Shoneyin, cet article examine la représentation du corps féminin dans des récits de fiction sur le corps sexo-spécifié, sexualisé et marchandisé. L'article soutient que dans le processus d'inscription du genre et de la sexualité sur le corps et de sa marchandisation, la question de l'esthétique corporelle est soulevée – l'ironique mise en avant du beau corps, la place du corps laid, les implications du corps déformé, et tous les artifices utilisés pour faire du corps ce qu'il n'est pas. L'article, après une analyse du corps féminin sexo-spécifié et transformé en marchandisé dans les romans susmentionnés, conclut que le corps est victime d'un pouvoir patriarcal et institutionnel qui y inscrit des positions et des préjugés et le dirige vers ce que l'on pourrait appeler l'auto-infériorisation, quand bien même les romancières offrent des espoirs d'émancipation.

## Introduction

In her introduction to *The Expressions of the Body: Representations in African Text and Image*, Charlotte Baker notes that “in recent years attention has turned to issues of bodily subjection, appropriation and agency, which have been explored from a range of perspectives; literary, anthropological, sociological and political”. Baker is, however, quick to mention that in Africa “representations of the body have been overlooked by cultural theorists” (2009:1). This is evidently true. The fact of this contention would be felt even more if one viewed the African feminist literary landscape where the body, gendered and sexualised, is constantly staged in fiction, although hardly discoursed. The female body and bodily acts in African feminist writing could be viewed as constituting a locus of discourse that can better affirm and uphold the goals of feminist criticism. Therefore, one crucial way of paying critical attention to the contemporary Nigerian feminist novel is to locate the place of corporeality, the figuration of the female body, and to examine how the body is inscribed and textualised. This kind of reading will begin from the assumption that the very basis of femininity, of feminisation, of sexuality and genderisation (sex and gender roles as prescribed by cultural institutions) is the body – the bare body in its primal and original form, flesh and blood, the essential matter. From this point, we can better comprehend how the female body – the flesh and blood – is inscribed upon, is de-natured (even in the guise of being made natural), and is subjected to patriarchal forces

by institutional powers. The institutional power we identify here is socio-cultural – the need to conform to the norms of the society even to the point of ruthlessly injuring the female body. Using three novels, namely Zaynab Alkali's (2005) *The Descendants*, Unoma Azuah's (2005) *Sky-High Flames*, and Lola Shoneyin's (2010) *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, this article examines how the female body is used and abused under the pressures of socio-cultural forces. Seytu, the protagonist of Alkali's novel, and Ofunne, the protagonist of Azuah's novel, suffer early marriage resulting in the rupture of their genitals and wombs, core parts of their bodies. As determined beings, however, they embark on the process of reconstructing their bodies and succeed in doing so. On the other hand, the women in Shoneyin's novel (Baba Segi's wives), find themselves constructing their own femaleness through the use and abuse of their own bodies in order to remain relevant in their society, a way of not only showing self-pity and inferiority but also of commodifying oneself under the pressures of cultural forces. The crucial argument here is that the female body in the Nigerian feminist novel is almost always the victim of affliction inflicted by cultural institutions, and, as such, there is the need in feminist aesthetics to pay attention to what we may call a female corporeality, a corporeality tending towards subversion and transgression, since we can see arising from it the possibility of altering socio-cultural conventions.

### Ruptured Genitals

*The Descendants* is Alkali's third novel, published after a considerable interregnum in her writing career. It, however, has a strong link with her earlier works of fiction. The novel conveniently locates itself in the trajectory of Alkali's thematics which bothers on the condemnation of early marriage and the privileging of education as a ground for female emancipation and self-development. But what is distinctive about *The Descendants* is what one would call the thematisation of the body – the damaging of the gendered body and its projection as a site of trauma, a concern that is less stressed in her earlier works. In her first novel *The Stillborn*, for instance, the trio of Li, Faku, and Awa marry the men of their dreams quite early in life, and in their naivety de-emphasise the chances of self-development with the hope that in their matrimonies they will find fulfilled lives. Things turn out otherwise; none of the three women is lucky enough to have a blissful matrimony. But Li, the heroine, rises above her collapsed matrimony and treads the path of self-development. Similarly, Nana the protagonist of her second novel *The Virtuous Woman*, and Mama the main character of her short story "The Cobwebs", are given out in early marriage. Mama hurts much because she is married to a man she does not like, a man who, in conceding that she can go

to school, insists on choosing what he considers as the right *feminine* course for her to study; she must read education, not the medicine she dreams of because it is too *masculine*. In their periods of troubled marriages, Alkali's idealised female characters seek education, and latch on to it as the only pragmatic means for self-emancipation.

Alkali's earlier female protagonists, no doubt, experience traumatic matrimonies, but the trauma does not find expression through the body, as in *The Descendants*. The bodies of Seytu and Mero are the focus here. Seytu, an orphan brought up by her uncle, is introduced as a young, beautiful woman in her family house doing the usual chores; but she carries a burden:

The optimistic young woman [Seytu] was elegant and smooth of complexion. She was blessed with a charming personality and a magnetic charisma. She swung her hips and thrust her head backwards as she walked, conscious of her beauty. She was greatly humorous and laughed easily, revealing a set of white sparkling teeth with a slight gap in the middle. It was rather hard to believe that *for four years, she carried a secret shame only a few people knew about*. (Emphasis added, 2005:7-8)

The "secret shame" she carries is the disfigurement of her vagina. That is to say, in spite of her beauty, of her cheerful countenance, her life is reduced or undermined by a powerful patriarchal inscription on her body.

In a forced marriage to an old man at the age of thirteen, Seytu's body becomes possessed by a patriarchal culture (her uncle Aji Ramta insists it is the best thing for her culturally), and by a man who, after inflicting pains on her, abandons her. He impregnates her – also in the fulfilment of one of the cultural expectations in marriage; he is shocked that after childbirth her vagina is ruptured. His reaction is to unsympathetically reject her body, the body he contributed to destroying. Seytu is traumatised by the fact that the secret part of her body, her genitals, her sexuality, is damaged by a man whom she does not even love. While violence to the corporeal being of the African woman is pervasive and is not limited to a particular part of her body, it is usually the sensitive, erotic parts of her body that suffer affliction, as is evident in Seytu's case.

Encouraged and supported by her grandmother Magira Milli, Seytu goes through life tending her "secret shame" with some measure of control. Like Li in *The Stillborn*, she begins the process of rising above her broken matrimony, and reaching out for life beyond her ruptured body. We encounter her in the novel having undergone the first operation towards correcting the walls of her vagina. She is now able to go to school. She awaits the second operation, and an important examination that will enable her pursue her education further. Her dream is to become a medical doctor. This is her

grandmother's prayer for her: "Seytu, the daughter of Ilia, her affliction pulls at my heart strings. Grant her a successful operation and cure her. Let her read and become educated. I want her to compete with the doctors in Makulpo Hospital" (2005: vi). Here too, Alkali projects education as that instrument, the *only* instrument, the woman can use effectively to liberate herself and, in the case of Seytu, transcend male-invented limits for women in a typical African society.

Seytu's agony is singularly located in her body, in the mutilation of her genitals. All her attention is on it, and it is only through an act of brilliance, of ingenuity, that she can write and pass her examination. Even so, her grandmother notices how the condition of her ruptured vagina distracts her, and "advised her to concentrate on her studies" (2005:58). The wound of her body conditions her movements and interactions. With a ruptured vagina, the uncontrollable passing of urine, she is inevitably confined to a place; she avoids having to think too much about it by concentrating on her studies. But, to study means having to go out, to attend classes, to mingle with her peers. She realises the unusual state of her body, and in associating with people she takes extra care so that her peers, most of them unmarried, should not perceive the offensive odour emanating from her wounded body. "For some time," the narrator says, "she had worked extra hard on her uncle's fields, and had bought female scents and female towels to use instead of the usual rags" (2005:42). The use of artificial means to hide her wounded body suggests the deployment of modernity towards redemption for a culturally damaged body; just the same way that she is relying on education, another aspect of modernity, to begin a new life. Fortunately, she undergoes her operation, gets healed and simultaneously gains admission to study medicine. She wins an award as the best student in her class. She starts work as a paediatrician in the local general hospital and will rise through the odds of being one of the very few female medical doctors in the area and eventually becoming the chief medical director of the hospital.

Unlike Seytu, Mero is not privileged to have a strong-willed grandmother like Magira Milli who stands her ground so that her granddaughter can be given an education. She is, like Seytu, an orphan, but does not have any relation that will cater for her. Her parents die in a ghastly accident. Usman, her father's friend and business associate whom she had before her parents' death regarded as a father, promptly grabs her and marries her in the disguise that he is going to take care of her. "After a traumatic year of shocked silence [...] [following the accident that took away the lives of Mero's parents], Usman uncharacteristically shocked the village [...] by marrying the fourteen-year-old little orphan girl, Mero. His excuse was to protect her and her father's

wealth which had been entrusted to him by Maina [Mero's father] himself" (2005:66). Mero, barely a woman, finds herself in Usman's house as his next wife; he subjects her to the cultural requirement of having a baby for him. Just after impregnating Mero, Usman succumbs to a fatal ailment. Mero, thus, has to grapple with her pregnancy as well as care for her dying husband, Usman's first wife (whom Mero sees as a mother) having abandoned him.

This is how Alkali first presents Mero to the reader:

The very young woman, not yet fifteen, looked severely emaciated, but it was the elderly husband who was actually the patient [at Makulpo General Hospital, living in Aji Ramta's house]. Usman's stomach was badly distended, his limbs spindly, and he walked as though pregnant. He was so much in pain that the taciturn wife, Mero, was constantly by his side. Mero was a highly composed young woman and worked harder than anybody else in the household. She always had bags under her eyes, which made her look older than she actually was. Highly strung and inhibited, she rarely laughed, but when she did, her face would light up like the little girl that she was, with such beauty one would wish Mero laughed more often. (2005:9)

Mero is denied the privilege of laughing, of living a life of her own. She has "bags under her eyes", which is to say that even though she is of the tender age of fourteen she carries the body that is far beyond that of her age; her body is so over-laboured that it acquires wrinkles. "The once jovial and much-loved little girl," Alkali writes, "turned into an ageing woman overnight, sullen and indifferent to her future. It was as if she had died with her parents" (2005:66-67). Consequently, her bodily acts or movements are mechanical, far from being natural, as "she simply went through the motions of living" (2005:81). She lives her life going through the "motions of living" just to take care of Usman, the elderly man who inflicts pains on her body and reduces her to a state of trauma. Mero's elderly husband dies, happy that he will eventually have a child of his own – his first wife is unable to give him a child; but Mero's body will further suffer from an affliction that will eventually become fatal. For once, as if she has a premonition, Mero does not give a thought to her pregnancy, she does not, like some women, experience the happiness of expecting a baby. Even her doctor at the Makulpo General Hospital is worried: "Mero is long overdue, but it was her attitude that disturbed the doctor. She was often depressed and seemed resigned" (2005:69). During childbirth she loses much blood but survives it. However, the doctor says she cannot conceive again. The injuries to Mero's body are now no longer limited to the outside; the inside of her body is injured as well, with consequences that are life-threatening.

While living as a widow, tending her daughter Binta, Mero falls in love with Abbas, Seytu's elder brother, and now begins to see the prospect of living her own life. That prospect is however hampered by the injuries inflicted on her body. Abbas is young, and she is his first wife, but she cannot conceive a child for him, given the doctor's warning. Abbas, an idealistic young man, says he does not really care about having a child from Mero. But she wants to bear a child for him, and does contrary to the doctor's advice. The result is that Mero dies, having been delivered of a healthy baby. The act concludes the wasting of Mero's life through damage to her body in a society that deploys patriarchal mores to inflict injuries on the body of the woman.

### Syphilitic Womb

*Sky-High Flames* is Azuah's first novel. Its feminist thrust is also located in the othering of a teenager's life through the infliction of injuries on her body. It is the story of Ofunne who finds herself in a typical southern Nigerian home that must mortgage her future for the wellbeing of her father's large family. Her father is polygamous. Ofunne is in a secondary school, working hard, dreaming of her future, when her father confronts her with an early marriage: "I want you to finish school as you've always wanted, but you can solve two problems at the same time by marrying Oko Okolo. He is an educated man himself. And he'll pay your way through school, see?" (2005:76). She in turn confronts him with the question: "Papa, you want to marry me off to a stranger because you need money?" (2005:76). He denies her accusation, but the reader knows that he desperately needs money to get medication for his two wives who are ill. He is overwhelmed by existential problems and he thinks the most practical solution is to give Ofunne out to Oko even though Ofunne does not know him. Oko is a young man working in one of the cities in faraway northern Nigeria. Culturally, he is not giving Ofunne out only because he has financial difficulties but also because she is a girl; her education, in such a patriarchal society, is deemed less valuable than that of a boy. Her gendered body, and indeed of any other girl in her society, has something of a price tag to it. Unlike that of male children, she can be given out, or *acquired* by a certain man, for a certain price, because she is physiologically a female. What is bodily crucial in her being commodified is that she has a vagina, breasts, and a womb, among other "commodities", and these are required by a man (who buys her) to perpetuate his patriarchy. Ofunne is, therefore, like every girl-child in Africa: a victim of an institutionalised discourse that others her being, especially her body which is debased to level of being a commodity that has to be sold, and urgently too, because money is required to carry out certain things in the family.



Ofunne is unable to resist her father's decision which he considers final. In Azuah's novel, as in Alkali's novel, the girls initially fail to put up stiff resistance mainly out of fear of being seen as outsiders in their societies. It is not that they are too young to raise an anti-patriarchal discourse that contests the evil of early marriage; in fact, Ofunne attempts to do that as she engages her father in an argument about her future. But they face a powerful, culturally rooted establishment that clearly overpowers them. Ofunne's father, for instance, imposes his final decision on Ofunne by declaring, "Don't question my actions, Ofunne. What is wrong with getting a man for you? And what is wrong with getting married (2005:76)?" Thus, Ofunne drops out of school and follows her husband to the city. Like Mero, she endures, even though she finds Oko to be the kind of man she would not like to live with; he is in fact not as rich as he pretends to be.

Compelled to marry, Ofunne thinks of how to make the best of it. She desires to have a baby not only for Oko's happiness, but also to fulfil one of the cultural requirements of a married life. She wants to prove to her society that she too can conceive, can give birth to a child. This desire, much as she nurses it, is stalled by a devastating affliction to her body. Her body becomes a receptacle for the disease of syphilis which Oko has contracted from one of his women and has been trying unsuccessfully to treat for quite some time. Ofunne is a teenager, with no knowledge of syphilis, and is unable to realise, in time, that she has such a terrible sexually transmitted disease. Besides, being a married woman, it is culturally implied that she can only complain, if she notices any health problem, to her husband who should take her to see a doctor. While Ofunne in her ignorance fails to notice the symptoms of syphilis, she does notice that she cannot conceive. She begs Oko to take her to see a doctor. Oko refuses, knowing that any diagnosis will surely reveal his protracted syphilis. After heated arguments and quarrels that draw the attention of their neighbours, Oko is forced to seek help through both western and traditional medicines. He succeeds in keeping the disease secret, while Ofunne conceives.

Unknown to Ofunne, her body is being slowly devastated by syphilis. In her innocence she does not know that what she sees as a blessing will turn out to be a traumatic experience from which she can hardly recover. Ofunne, like Mero, has not known the happiness of matrimony, and she longs for the coming of her baby which she thinks will make her happy. Her almost childish innocence and simplicity, and her desire to take the best out of the forced marriage, are shattered by the forces of affliction that in her own eyes and in the eyes of her society render her body useless – for after surviving a syphilitic womb, she is not sure if she can again conceive and



bear her own baby. Until she has a stillbirth, Ofunne is not aware that her womb is gone. For a girl eager to prove to her mother, and to her society, that she too can have a baby of her own, and to pursue genuine marital happiness in bringing up her baby, Ofunne is shocked and traumatised that her baby comes out dead. It helps that Ofunne has the stillbirth in a local hospital in her community, and that her parents are around during the labour. They all witness that

When the baby came out, there was no cry, no sound from him. The nurses turned him upside down and slapped his buttocks. He didn't respond. The doctor and two of the nurses rushed him to another room. The look on my parents' faces confirmed that something was wrong. (2005:149)

In order to prevent further stillbirth, several medical tests on Oko and Ofunne were conducted. Oko receives the results of the tests, refuses to show them to his traumatised wife and, to Ofunne's surprise, takes off to the city suddenly. Ofunne and her mother meet the doctor who reveals the cause of the stillbirth: "Didn't [your husband] tell you? I even gave him some medicine for the two of you [...]. You have syphilis and it had reached its advanced stage. That was what killed your baby" (2005:159). Ofunne is aware that her husband has syphilis, but she is deceived into believing that it has been cured, not knowing that either she or her husband has not undergone proper treatment. "The syphilis," the doctor warns her, "would not only take your sight if you don't treat it, it could kill you" (2005:159).

By now Ofunne realises that her body has been damaged by the man her parents have sold her to. The parents also understand this, for it is Ofunne's mother who offers the money with which Ofunne pays for her medication. But what is crucial in Azuah's dramatisation of the affliction of the gendered body, as it is in Alkali's, is that Ofunne, is increasingly growing obstinate and petulant with the realisation that her body has been given to Oko as a commodity. She, too, decides to seek a new life. Interestingly, Azuah foregrounds the instrumentality of tradition for a girl seeking a new vision after being hurt, abused and deeply injured by the patriarchal exertions of the same tradition. Ofunne takes her supplication to the deity of the community, the water goddess Onishe: "I sat in front of the [Onishe] shrine and cried. I begged whatever powers that be to cure me of the illness Oko gave me, to let me complete my education and become a teacher" (2005:161). The Onishe shrine is one of the cultural institutions that controls the discourse of gender in the society where human beings are gendered, where codes are formulated to render the female gender inferior, to inscribe certain social meanings on the body of the female gender. It is difficult for one to understand why Ofunne thinks that Onishe or "the

powers that be” in her shrine can assist her in countering the hegemonic tradition that puts her in the path of early marriage. Even with the intention and pronouncement to seek education and live the remaining part of her life for *herself* (“You and father have had a good part of my life, whatever is now left of me is mine” (2005:163)), Ofunne does not appear strong-willed enough to embark on her self-emancipation project. Despite the glaring injuries to her body, her parents still want her to remain with Oko. Her mother admonishes: “You may still have a child together” (2005:160). What this implies is that Ofunne is not fully free, and might not be able to extricate herself, from the cultural establishment that, in the first place, caused affliction to her body. It is, however, useful to envisage Ofunne’s future – she will be a mature person, educated, but above all, her afflicted body will get healed, and she will face life making her own choices.

### **Barren Wombs**

In the case of Bolanle, the youngest of Baba Segi’s four wives, her womb is declared barren by her husband who is paranoiac that she cannot give him a child, despite having had children from the other wives. It turns out, after a medical examination, that Bolanle’s womb is fertile; it is rather her husband who suffers from infertility, a fact that raises crucial questions concerning the paternity of the children he has all the while been claiming are his. This is the interesting, ironic twist in Shoneyin’s novel that challenges cultural convention in a way that appears to radicalise bodily acts and the willpower of the woman. Baba Segi’s other wives have all had extramarital affairs for the purposes of giving birth to children for him; if they do not give birth to children, they will be declared barren by their husband, by their society, because their husband is known for his libido and he celebrates his sexual intercourses with them. But what he does not know is that his sperm cannot fertilise an egg; he is not able to impregnate a woman. To subject themselves to the patriarchal forces of their society, to prove they are not barren as their husband sees them, the women must, in what one may see as self-abuse, resort to adultery. While this form of adultery may be a strategic way of displaying power in order to conveniently insert oneself in an acceptable cultural milieu, it appears to undermine the dignity of the wives, not just as women but as human beings. Of the four wives, Bolanle is the one with western education, a university graduate, who decides to marry a man who is polygamous and without any western education. Her education or civilisation, therefore, becomes an instrument of subversion. It is through this instrument that she punctures the falsehood that rules Baba Segi’s household.

The first wife, Iya Segi, starts the process of finding what she calls a “seed” when it is obvious to her that her husband’s sperm does not contain seed, and the man, his family, her family, and indeed the entire society expects her to conceive and give birth to a child. In her words,

I was childless and restless.... My husband and I tried everything. He did not let my thighs rest but leapt between them every time dusk descended upon us. Even his mother was hungry for his seed to become fruit.... Then I had an idea.... If my husband did not have [a] seed[,] then what harm could it do to seek it elsewhere?... So, I found seed and planted it in my belly. (2010:215)

Taju, her husband’s driver, becomes the donor of the seed. Happiness returns to the household as soon as she conceives. When her other co-wives Iya Tope and Iya Femi arrive, she gives them this key to happiness. Iya Tope, the second wife, grabs this key because her husband, tired of waiting for her to conceive despite making love to her constantly, has already warned: “If your father has sold me a rotten fruit, it will be returned to him” (2010:84). The novel is emphatic that Baba Segi, as a husband, and the society in which they live compel the women to commit adultery in order to bring home babies. But when Bolanle comes she is denied this key out of jealousy. It is also clear that being an educated woman she would refuse this key; she prefers medical examinations to ascertain the problem because it is presumed that she is the one with the problem of barrenness. Her husband is particularly impatient with her because having children from the other wives implies that he is physiologically fine.

The ironic twist of the novel, namely that Baba Segi, with all his assertive masculinity, finds out that he is not the father of his children, is built on the interplay of bodily acts. All the wives end up in his house either as commodified bodies or as abused bodies seeking to stay anywhere. Although Baba Segi thinks he falls in love with Bolanle and is proud of marrying her because she is a university graduate, she marries him as a way of resigning her fate to a man, old enough to be her father, who will take her the way she is. She refers to herself as an empty shell after her virginity is taken away through rape, and the subsequent abortion in the hands of a quack. Iya Femi too suffers abuse from her Madam’s son Tunde “who first climbed between [her] legs” (2010:124), in addition to acts of cruelty the Madam committed against her body. She narrates that,

If I didn’t answer the first time she yelled my name, she shaved every strand of hair on my head. If I ever overslept, she would cut me all over with a blade and rub chilli powder into the wounds. Once, when she saw me speaking to the gateman, she stripped me naked, rubbed chilli between my thighs and locked me out of the house for a whole day. (2010:124)

Baba Segi gets her as a wife on a platter of gold, so to speak, because she is being brutalised by her madam and she needs to get out of the house. In the case of Iya Tope, her father, a village farmer, gives her out to Baba Segi in the year of bad harvests because he needs money to make up for his loss, which Baba Segi readily gives. Iya Tope says of herself, “I was compensation for the failed crops. I was just like the tubers of cassava in the basket. Maybe something even less, something strange – a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms and two legs” (2010:82). The women, therefore, have been gendered and commodified before coming to Baba Segi’s house, and the husband has a firm belief in the sexualisation of the women, insisting on preordained gender identities and roles, crudely overseeing the wives as his possessed properties with which he could do whatever he wanted.

### **Beyond the Wounded Body**

In the novels, the ground of feminist contestation is the peculiar corporeality of the woman. That is to say, the body of the woman is a site frequently invaded by ideologies that are sexist and cultural. Trinh Minha is right to assert that “the Body, the most visible difference between men and women, the only one to offer a secure ground for those who seek the permanent, the feminine ‘nature’ and ‘essence,’ remains thereby the safest basis for racist and sexist ideologies” (1989:100). The woman’s body is faced with an aggression from both the man as an individual and the society as a patriarchal establishment. While the two conceivably strong forces desire to render the woman’s body weak and consequently subservient, and to in fact destroy it, what is instructive in the fiction of Alkali, Azuah, and Shenyin is that the heroines, Seytu, Ofunne, and Bolanle, respectively, are able to overcome not only the physical assaults on their bodies but also the constructed discourse of patriarchy that profoundly characterizes goings-on in their respective societies, even though in the initial stage they are unable to resist the forces of patriarchy. In material, psychological and corporeal terms, Seytu turns out to be a success as she emerges in the second part of the novel as a paediatrician, a far more successful medical doctor than her male counterparts in a society where female medical doctors are rare. She is not only totally healed of a vesico-vaginal fistula, having undergone surgeries, but she is also able to re-marry, conceive and have a happy home. Ofunne’s triumph is better imagined as she, despite the odds, frees herself from the rather insurmountable shackles constituted by her parents, her in-laws, and her husband. And she appears set for a great life ahead of her now that she vows to be in control of her life. Bolanle, the educated, youngest wife of Baba Segi suffers rape and crude abortion and then (unwillingly) submits

herself to further abuse in a polygamous home but emerges victorious as she becomes instrumental to deflating her husband's false life, and the myth that it is only women that can be barren.

The body is such a peculiar material expression of human beings that it harbours memories whether good or bad. That is, any physical contact with the body either forcefully as an assault or wilfully as, say, ritual marks, is hard to erase. Even when body scars get blurred, they are not totally removed. The scars or marks thus remain a dwelling for discourses that continually assert themselves, that constantly haunt the owners of the bodies. In a broad sense, scarred bodies are memories that gnaw at the conscience of society. They inflect bodily acts; they also influence discourses. The capacity of the body to harbour and generate discourses beyond its material being has resulted in the recent studies of the body as a site of cultural contestation. No doubt, the body of the African woman seeks greater attention as it is, even in contemporary times, represented in recent feminist fiction, increasingly abused, victimized, and subjected to cultural violence.

While violence to the corporeal being of the African woman is pervasive and is not limited to a particular part of her body, it is usually the sensitive, erotic parts of her body that suffer affliction. Heather Hewett stated that in contemporary fiction from Africa, there are "intersections of corporeality, gender, sexuality, power, and agency" (2009:254). Sexuality, in particular, has centred itself in the discourses located in the corporeality of the African woman, as the novels we are concerned with here represent. The affliction on their bodies often begins from their genitals. In my view, genitalism (that is, the traditional protocols based on biological consideration for gendering the body, and the consequent inferiorisation of the body through the genital organs) is, thus, central to the cultural discourse of sexuality in the societies of the heroines. The trauma of the girl-child, then, begins from the possession of the female genital organs, which inevitably, in most African societies, puts the girl in the way of marriage. Her vagina becomes the most vital avenue for performing gender, to invoke Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (Salih 2004), which results in marriage, matrimony, and mothering. Marriage itself and its concomitant mothering, as feminist writers and theorists in Africa consistently reveal, do not necessarily occlude the development of the woman (see Arndt 2002). However, the imposed marriage, patriarchy-driven, which often comes too early in the life of the girl, compelled to perform her gender according to cultural restrictions, remains a fundamental bane in her self-development. This culturally imposed early marriage forms the background for the trauma arising from the sexed bodies of the heroines in *The Descendants*, *Sky-High Flames*, and, to some

extent, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Marriage, in the novels, is one expression of the hostile culture that the body has had to face. Culturally, the respective societies of the heroines value early marriage, attaching virtues to the practice of having a nubile young woman settle down with a man. In most cases, it does not matter if the girl is in love. The man, who takes her as a wife, as we have seen in the novels, often presents himself as a benefactor to the girl. This, of course, further unveils how vulnerable the young female body is within a hostile culture. Girls who have just reached puberty are often given away in marriage in exchange for what her parents see as badly needed wealth. In most cases, a girl may, or is forced to, succumb and thus subject her tender body to a regime of corporeal plunder. The optimism of the novels discussed here is such that the girls are courageous enough to take a bold step towards self-emancipation. Fiction, then, for these female writers concerned about the fate of the ruptured female body, of the culturally oppressed female body, is an instrument of a crucial discourse aimed at confronting the rather unending violence against the body. It is a way of using literary aesthetics as a means of remaking the African female body.

## **Conclusion**

The central argument in this article is that to fully understand how women suffer under culture and patriarchy, to fully map out how the protocols of feminist discourse can effectively enhance the emancipation of women, we need to look closely at the body, how it is gendered, commodified, sexualised, and how it hurts from other forms of inscription from the society. Reading closely three novels – *The Descendants*, *Sky-High Flames*, and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* – we have focused on the abused bodies of the female characters, and how the characters courageously decide to heal their wounded bodies, a way of not only embarking on the role of remaking their own bodies, but also of challenging patriarchal institutions. It is symbolic that the protagonists of these novels whose bodies are wounded are young women, and are courageous enough to resist, even if weakly, the regime of cultural oppression. From the perspectives of these novelists, women should vacate the position of being objects in a cultural setting and occupy the position of being subjects, able to function as agents of change – a change that brings about self-development. Experience, here, becomes the locus of personal action based on negotiation within a society hostile to the progress of women. What is pertinent is that the wounded body can, and does, get healed, because the heroines negotiate their ways through the cultural and institutional patriarchy that confines them. With Bolanle in Baba Segi's house, the patriarchal myth that a woman is barren if she fails

to conceive is shattered, as it is revealed that the woman's eggs are intact, and it is the man's sperm that fails. Seytu survives a horrendous condition of vesico-vaginal fistula to become the best paediatrician in her society. This suggests that the scars of their wounded bodies only spur them towards not only recuperating their dreams but those of other people in the society. Corporeality, and its nuances should, therefore, be seen as a crucial domain for refreshing and fruitful feminist discourses.

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