**Yunusy Castory Ng'umbi**
Yunusy Castory Ng'umbi is affiliated with the Department of English at Stellenbosch University and lectures in the Department of Literature at the University of Dar es Salaam.
Email: yngumbi@yahoo.com

# Re-imagining family and gender roles in Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor stones*

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This paper examines the interplay between polygyny and gender by exploring the way in which family structure and gender roles are negotiated, imagined and exercised in fiction. Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor stones* (2006) is read in order to explore how the institution of polygyny changes over time and how it influences gender role negotiation. Using an African feminist approach, the paper juxtaposes the historical and contemporary institution of polygyny in relation to gender role negotiation and how contemporary writers build on their literary precursors in re-writing the history of polygyny and gender according to the socio-cultural needs of twenty-first century Africans. These changes in socio-cultural, economic and political spheres in Africa have played a pivotal role in altering family structure and arrangements. I therefore argue that the changes in familial structure and arrangement necessitate gender role negotiation. **Keywords**: Aminatta Forna; family; gender roles; nego-feminism; polygyny; womanism.

## Introduction

Aminatta Forna, the Sierra Leonean writer, encourages readers to interrogate family dynamics through fiction. Her novel, *Ancestor stones* (2006), rich in history and women's memories, is told through the voices of four women in the Kholifa family: cousins Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah. The story is about the family of Gibril Umaru Kholifa, a polygynous husband with eleven wives. The novel begins with a letter written by Alpha to his cousin, Abie. The letter urges Abie to come back home to revive the fortunes of the family coffee plantation. Abie's aunts have decided to leave the family coffee plantation for her to revive. Once she is back home, Abie's aunts (Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah) tell her stories. These stories are about the polygynous family, civil wars, bi-racial marriage, economic struggle, education, religious conflicts, corruption and European incursion in mining centres. These stories, narrated by different women with different experiences in the polygynous family, remind Abie of her personal history. By using the four aunts as narrators, the author makes the story rich in history and women's memories.

The stories of the four aunts provide a rich body of knowledge about what polygyny means; how it is used in gender role negotiation; how the narrative critiques Ogunyemi's womanism philosophy; and which "alternative tools" the narrative suggests for gender role negotiation, which implies a conglomeration of intersecting


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ideas of vision, accessibility to another world and desire for change. As a character, Asana, in *Ancestor stones* states, "I wanted to come to this world, to the place where things happen. I didn't want to stay where I was. I always had big eyes for this world and I was born with them open. My mother never feared for me. There are some children—you can tell the ones—born with a hunger for life" (Forna 16).

In this article, I focus on how the family structure, space and gender roles are negotiated, imagined, and exercised in Forna's novel. I argue that the change in familial structure and arrangement necessitates gender role negotiation. One of the forces of change in African family structures and spaces, apart from colonialism, is the changes in gender politics: understanding gender roles and responsibilities, social instabilities and economic strain (civil wars, migration, refugeeism and diaspora).

Unlike works by her literary precursors such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Grace Ogot, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, and Bessie Head as well as by her contemporaries such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Seffi Atta, Helen Oyeyemi, and Diana Evans, Forna's *Ancestor stones* covers a broad historical trajectory during which tremendous changes in familial arrangements start taking place.[1] The novel begins with a polygynous family of eleven co-wives and ends by portraying widowhood as empowering; it also sees women entering professions and deals with divorce and bi-racial marriage.

Forna's narrative encourages readers to interrogate the efficacy of the institution of the "family" in initiating gender role negotiation in order to bring about equality and equity between men and women. Scholars from different fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, cultural studies, political science, and gender studies have variously defined the "family" as a tribal unit, biologically related members, a metaphor for nation and a microcosm of a larger community (Malinowski; Mbiti; Lee; McClintock; Strach; Carlson and Knoester; Wilder and Cain). However, as I demonstrate below, this paper is influenced by Grace Musila's meticulous analysis of the family trope. Musila points out three sets of familial spaces, which are derived from literary contexts: literal family in the sense of blood relations, nation-families as imagined communities of people bound together by an imagined collective identity, and literary families in the sense of the canonical and artistic/cultural community (3). I specifically focus on the literal family by considering the cross-generation relationships between characters in the narrative. The first section of the article historicises the institution of polygyny and the second section centres on the new trend in familial arrangements.

**Historicising the familial structure and space: (re)reading polygyny**

*Ancestor stones* provides a nexus between past and present with the aim of eschewing the historical past that was built on patriarchal power dominance and gender inequality. The contemporary generation of African women writers began to advocate



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new changes that "seek not only to reinterpret, but to change the world in favour of women" (Anthonia Akpabio Ekpa 28). Forna's narrative offers an opportunity to (re)read the institution of polygyny in twenty-first century Africa. In this section, I consider the representation of the history of familial structure and space to be a stepping stone by means of which contemporary African women writers argue for changes in the institution of family. Forna depicts the ineffectiveness of gender role negotiation tools in traditional African societies and the ways in which the contemporary generation can improve.

In discussing the history of familial structure and space as depicted in *Ancestor stones*, I interrogate the eleven wives of Gibril Kholifa Umaru in order to establish their different perceptions and experiences of polygyny. I consider these eleven wives of Gibril as the "older generation" in the sense of the genealogy of female characters depicted in the narrative. Here I agree with Kenneth Harrow who views *Ancestor stones* as a novel that takes us back a few generations to the women ancestors on the African side of Forna's family (13) in order to create a space that links the past with present. Therefore, in this case, the narrative communicates that contemporary African women writers do not disavow history but rather rewrite it according to the socio-cultural needs of the day. Forna's narrative reveals how female characters challenge patriarchal power and practically assume power and control in decision making.

Born in a large polygynous family of eleven co-wives, the narrators (Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah) give a historical account of how their mothers were part of a polygynous institution. They depict their father, Gibril, as a rich man who uses his wealth to control and domesticate women. In narrating the contrast between Gibril and the slaughterhouse worker (Hawa's husband), Hawa says: "this man [the slaughterhouse worker] was so poor I became his only wife" (179–80). Since the slaughterhouse worker has no access to polygyny, Hawa has to lead her "married life working like a servant" (180). In this context the narrative appears to echo ideas of scholars such as Helen Ware, Dominique Meekers and Nadra Franklin, Obioma Nnaemeka, Michael Boyle, and Cynthia Cook who view the institution of polygyny in the African traditional context as advantageous to women. These scholars underscore the issues of shared responsibility and reduced labour force in the polygynous family. They are of the view that the higher the number of wives in the household the less toil women experience in the family.

Hawa wants her husband to be polygynous in order to get co-wives who could help her in handling the household chores. She decides to divorce the slaughterhouse worker for failing to marry another woman. Through Hawa, readers are invited to read the institution of polygyny as a negotiation tool for gender roles in traditional African societies. It was powerful in lessening the burden of traditional "women's roles" in the family. In this regard, Hawa communicates a form of gender role negotiation through what Nnaemeka calls "compromise" ("Nego-Feminism" 378) with



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the patriarchal power. Nnaemeka points out that this strand of African feminism is built on the indigenous and it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts ("Nego-Feminism" 378).

Hawa grew up in a polygynous system and is therefore aware of certain men's desire to marry as many women as they can. In this context, Hawa is not only the link between the historical and the present polygynous family structure, but also attempts to reshape the modern day polygyny so as to become a weapon to lessen the burden of gender roles that are shouldered by women. Hawa's disapproval of her husband is not only because he is poor to the extent of not marrying other wives, but also she is not ready to be domesticated, "working like a servant"; rather, she wants to be flexible in life by alternating "wife roles" between her and her co-wife. And, based on Meekers and Franklin's views on the mutual relationship between wealth and polygyny, Gibril (as the narrative suggests) is right to marry the eleven wives because he is rich and being rich in the traditional context was a precondition for polygynous marriage. As Meekers and Franklin would argue, women characters in the narrative also prefer polygyny "because polygynous husbands tend to be wealthy" (315) and there is a possibility for them also to be rich.

The need for women's flexibility and reducing gendered responsibilities shouldered by women in polygynous marriage is also captured by Ya Namina, the senior wife of Gibril. She has the authority to choose wives for her husband and assign them responsibilities in taking care of their husband. What Ya Namina does as a senior wife is to "maximize [the family's] economic benefits by selecting hard-working co-wives, and to limit intrafamily conflicts by choosing those junior co-wives [she] likes" (Meekers and Franklin 315), and the ones who can respect her as a senior wife. Nakanyike Musisi and Nnaemeka ("Urban Spaces") argue along similar lines by underscoring the power of polygyny in empowering women. Focusing on the Buganda kingdom, Musisi warns against the dangers of misrepresenting the polygyny system in Africa. She calls for a critical distinction between the polygyny systems practised in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial times. For Musisi, the precolonial polygyny system was strategically used by elites "to create and ultimately to control not only economic but political and social components of a state apparatus" (758). Besides, the Baganda women, says Musisi, were not excluded from political processes but rather "played an important role at the state level in balancing internal and regional politics" (786). Musisi, inevitably, looks at precolonial polygyny as an institution that was decent to women because it made them visible in public spheres. Therefore, in this context, Ya Namina uses a polygynous family as a decent space for women's empowerment, "maintenance of equity, justice, harmony, and sharing of responsibility" (Nnaemeka, "Urban spaces" 173). She seems to refute Michele Tertilt's assertion that polygyny obstructs development in many Sub-Saharan African countries and rather perceives it as a space for socialisation among women. Ya Namina subscribes to the African



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traditions by accepting the polygyny system that "provides children (and workers) for Africa's predominantly agricultural society, sons for men, and social security for women in their old age" (Cook 249). For Wakota elsewhere, Ya Namina holds the view that having "many children means more labour and more labour means wealth" (56). Arguing in line with Musisi, Cook and Wakota, Nnaemeka blames the Western feminist critics for misrepresenting the polygyny system in Africa. She aptly argues that, "African women who are in polygynous marriages are not morons or powerless, exploited, [and] downtrodden victims" ("Urban spaces" 167).

Indeed, such power and empowerment of women in precolonial time as articulated by Musisi and Nnaemeka is evident through the cooperation among the co-wives in Gibril's family. They live as sisters; each is aware of the others and they are responsible for taking care of all children in the polygynous household, if need be. For instance, when Hawa's mother is sick, Saffie takes care of her children. The kind of polygyny the narrative suggests through the wives of Gibril is the one that allows interaction among co-wives and obeys the hierarchy in the family, that is, from senior to junior wife. Such a family structure is also well articulated in Achebe's *Things fall apart* (1958) and Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), where the roles of senior and junior wives are portrayed and practised accordingly without any quarrel. This type of polygyny is far from the desertion of women, as it happens in Bâ's *So long a letter* (1980).[2] Pondering Ramatoulaye's husband Modou's version of polygyny, Nnaemeka says, "Modou's action is the foolish act of an irresponsible, wayward spouse and sugar daddy that has absolutely nothing to do with the institution of polygyny as it is inscribed both in Islamic law and African culture" ("Urban spaces" 177–8). Subscribing to the "inscription of African culture," as Nnaemeka puts it, Ya Namina controls her co-wives in order to make sure that they obey her as a senior wife and act according to the needs of their patriarchal husband. Ya Namina "didn't like a wife she couldn't control" (64) and as a result she was to be the only one to choose women to marry her husband. The mutual understanding among co-wives and cooperation in solving their family problems validate the social mutualism of an African polygynous family.

That is why even Hawa, after having experienced her mother's life in a polygynous marriage, defines the concept of "co-wifehood" using the Mende word *ores* to mean

> [t]he women who share your husband with you. The women with whom you take turns to cook. The women you give whatever is left over in your own pot. The women who are the other mothers of your children, who suckle your baby when your own milk has dried up or unexpectedly soured … the word [*ores*] has another meaning … it means rival. (65)

It can be agreed that in such a large polygynous family, it is hard to meet the interests of every individual and therefore rivalries are unavoidable. What matters



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is the harmony and cooperation among co-wives. Since Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah represent the generation of African women who are exposed to the two worlds (traditional and modern), they offer a critique of the two worlds based on their own experiences.

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

The history of polygyny as narrated by the four Kholifa family members inspires readers to consider the silence of the eleven wives of Gibril. In theorizing the discourse of power, Michel Foucault views silence as a shelter for power. He aptly observes: "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (101). Departing from Foucault's assertion, I consider silence to be a state of compromise and readiness to accept situations as they unfold. The narrative has silenced the co-wives to give their daughters a chance to speak on their behalf. Here, there is a danger of misinterpreting their perception of polygyny. Nnaemeka warns: "speaking for others requires carefully walking a fine line between participation and usurpation … speaking for others does not create absence and exclusion" ("Urban spaces" 163). The co-wives' participation in commenting on the state of their marriage in a polygynous family is very minimal. It is only on a few occasions that these women express their feelings to their polygynous husband. For example, Hawa's mother, Tenkamu, sings a song to her husband to express her love and commitment to her marriage (62). The fact that Gibril married only one wife, Tenkamu, out of choice indicates how polygyny as depicted in this narrative is driven by women. The narrator says, "After she [Ya Namina] was widowed she could have returned to her own people as other wives did. But she stayed and chose a new husband from the younger brothers. She chose my father" (16). Then she became the senior wife and the rest of the other co-wives, except Tenkamu, "were chosen by Ya Namina" (64). Women are interested in marrying Gibril because he is a chief and a rich man. Therefore, despite the oppressive



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sentiments they encounter in their polygynous marriage such as being forced to desert their traditional religions, these women have accepted it and live a happy life. Their readiness to be in a polygynous familial structure communicates not only a form of gender role negotiation that could enable them to lessen the burden of gender roles that were shouldered by women, but also a desire to benefit from their husband's wealth.

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

**The new trend of familial arrangement**

In this section, I use the concept "new trend" to mean the views of the contemporary generation of African women writers. Here, I do not mean that the older generation of African women writers had no vision in their representation of the family in their narratives. Rather, each writing is influenced by time and space. Forna writes for twenty-first century generation readers who have a different life experience because of socio-political and economic changes. Therefore, as I demonstrate below, *Ancestor stones* is a narrative that speaks about how the changes in family structure and space begin to occur and their implications for gender role negotiation. I do so by engaging in a discussion about how the narrative revises the familial structure, which in a way suggests gender role negotiation in an environment where patriarchal control dominates. As discussed above, the narrative represents how women were trying to negotiate power through the institution of polygyny but did not succeed. The failure of those means of negotiation calls for "new" ways that will make women negotiate power amidst patriarchal dominance. In this section, I discuss how women use the institution of the family to negotiate power by directly involving men in negotiation (as two conflicting parties) and how women navigate their way to achieve power amidst patriarchal hegemony. I argue in line with Elleke Boehmer's view that "any piece of writing is a product of its time" (8) to justify how time and space provide a setting in which to evaluate the representation of characters in fiction.

Forna creates female characters who are conscious of what it means to be a woman in the twenty-first century. The narrative suppresses the teachings of mothers to their daughters that aim to subject them to patriarchal power. For example, Asana



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is told by her mother: "before you are married keep both eyes open and after you are married close one eye. But when I was young I closed my ears instead" (107). The narrative's characters appear to challenge women's tradition-bearing role, as discussed by Boehmer in her assertion that women in a postcolonial nation "are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of tradition" (*Stories of women* 22). Rather, they are determined to change the world so that the woman's body is no longer a fetish and a marker of traditions that deify men's power over women. The "closing of ears" as the character Asana demonstrates, is a sign of resistance. It is instrumental in signifying the female character's refusal to accept the "old traditions" that deny women power in decision making in the family. What Asana does is not only to reject the "old traditions" that oppress women, but also to dismantle a family structure that divides children on the basis of gender.

Pointing out the new direction that women can take in order to subvert men's power dominance over women, the narrative suggests revisiting African traditions with the aim of modifying them. It disrupts the discourses that contrive binary oppositions such as men/women, husband/wife, traditional/modern, child/adult, and religious/non-religious, which are the sources of inequality in the family and in society at large. By so doing, the novel inevitably creates a new form of family structure where the father figure, as portrayed by the older generation of African women writers, is no longer the head of the family. Even in polygynous situations, the father is silenced to give women a chance to speak. For example, Ya Namina, the senior wife in *Ancestor stones* is in charge of everything in the family: "she paid the workers their wages and held the keys to the store; she ordered the provisions and hired the servants" (31) and the rest of the wives are answerable to her except for Tenkam. While *The joys of motherhood* (1979) by Buchi Emecheta suggests empowering women through emasculating men such as Nnaife and Ubani, *Ancestor stones* goes a step further by masculinizing women.[3] It gives power to Ya Namina to control the family. The same applies to Asana; she marries Osman Iscandari as a third wife. When Asana is ill-treated by her husband, she seeks advice from her senior wife, Ngadie, who advises her to break up the marriage (127). Therefore, the narrative gives women power to make decisions for and to control their families. To achieve this role, it advocates cooperation among women in order to defeat patriarchal dominance.

The novel considers men to be one of the enemies of women's success in their struggle for empowerment. By saying so, I am not accusing the narrative of advocating radical feminism which does not believe in the involvement of men in the women's struggle. I find it unfair to place the narrative together with the likes of Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at point zero* (1975), where the female character, Firdaus, considers men as her rivals and resorts to killing them. I am aware of *Ancestor stones*'s articulation of African womanist ideas as propounded by Ogunyemi. Like Tambudzai in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous conditions* (1988), Asana has "wishful



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thinking … of seeing her twin brother, Alusani, die for her to win back her mother" (30). The same trend of eliminating male characters is seen in Bessie Head's *When rain clouds gather* (1968). Here, a careful reading is required in order to uncover the sort of men Dangarembga, Head and Forna's narrative eliminate. It is an undeniable fact that Tambudzai's success in life is due, to a great extent, to her patriarchal uncle, Babamukuru. Immediately after the death of Tambudzai's brother, Nnamo, Babamukuru directs his financial aid for education to Tambudzai. In a similar way, in the building of a new house, which symbolically represents the postcolonial nation, *Ancestor stones* values the contribution of both men and women. Men, represented by Yaya, Serah's brother, work hand in hand with women to make sure that the new house is big enough for the family. *Ancestor stones*, as Ogunyemi (72) would argue, emphasises a mutual cooperation among African men and women in the building of the postcolonial state that offers an equal sharing of resources and power control. Female characters consider the African male as their collaborator, not as antagonist (Palmer 84). The reason for including both men and women is to avoid the duplication of mentorship or what Susan Arndt calls "business … If you just take the women alone and deal only with the women, then you are going to come back to the men who have not changed at all …" (717). Thus the narrative, as Arndt argues elsewhere, advocates a common ground where both men and women meet to set goals that will serve equally and equitably the interests of men and women.

Commenting on Head's *When rain clouds gather*, Ogunyemi credits it with being "a womanist novel … where bad men are eliminated so that men and women can live together harmoniously" (76). However, Ogunyemi does not state categorically the traits of a "bad" man. To be more specific about what Ogunyemi regards as "bad" men, *Ancestor stones*, like Head and Dangarembga's narratives, resorts to eliminating men who act as stumbling blocks to women's achievement of their socio-political and economic rights. Right from birth, says Asana, Alusani's "best deed in this world was to take from me what was mine" (17). Nnaemeka acknowledges the dual meaning of negotiation as "give and take/exchange" as well as to "cope with successfully/go around" (378). Such kind of negotiation, inevitably, is associated with a win-defeat principle. Forna portrays it as a viable form of negotiation because the patriarchal power has been using the same method in depriving women of their rights. Thus the narrative advocates a non-competitive environment where women can excel in their struggle without being in conflict with patriarchy by eliminating and marrying off wicked men in the family in order to make room for both men and women to exercise their powers equally.

Indeed, the novel's agenda to build a society that grants power and authority to women and men equally is very central. It depicts female characters that are determined to change. The narrative juxtaposes the older generation (Gibril's eleven wives) and the contemporary generation (their daughters who are also narrators) in order to



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show their differences and how to resolve them. It is worth noting that the narrative considers "marriage", "bride price" and "divorce" as concepts that depend on and influence each other. Marriage in the traditional context as depicted in narratives such as Ogot's *The promised land* (1966) and Emecheta's *The joys of motherhood* cannot be achieved without a bride price. It is a prerequisite for marriage. In contrast, for *Ancestor stones*, bride price is not a necessary condition for marriage. Rather, it is used as a tool for negotiating divorce. At the same time, the narrative introduces divorce as a counter-discourse to negotiate the binary oppositions such as the husband/wife power relationship. For example, the frequent "travelling, boarding, buying and selling" (94) Saffie, Serah's mother, does in order to get money to pay back her bride price because she is not ready to continue staying with a man who cannot afford her. Interestingly, she is assisted by the court of elders.

Due to changes in the society, under the influence of modernity, even court elders (who settle the divorce case between Saffie and Gibril) have changed and realize the importance of treating women fairly in the institution of marriage. In this case, the court of elders headed by men lays the ground for gender role negotiation. The court of elders encourages divorce in circumstances where women are ill-treated in order "to teach a lesson to those young men who could not afford wives of their own" (94). The novel discourages the diminishing value of a woman manifested in the bride price. Apart from equating a woman to mere commodities, the bride price domesticates her and prevents her voice from being heard in the public sphere. The narrative makes the matter complex when Saffie divorces her husband, Gibril, and "she never did pay him back" (101) the bride price. Such a complication invites readers to explore the kind of resistance Saffie brings to the fore in demonstrating her awareness of struggling for power. She knows how much she suffered in the institution of marriage engineered by bride price. Therefore, the money she will get out of selling eggs will be used to heal the wounds she suffered in her marriage, instead of sending it back to Gibril as the court of elders agreed.

It is interesting to note that, apart from encouraging divorce and widowhood through Asana, the narrative perceives motherhood as an essential aspect of African women. It regards motherhood as an institution that gives power to a woman. The novel refutes Nnaemeka's perception of motherhood in the African context. According to Nnaemeka, "motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers". She further advocates the "enactment of a *philosophy of evacuation* ("Imag(in)ing" 5; italics in original).[4] For Nnaemeka, a woman can assert her freedom by rejecting motherhood and opting for other alternatives, for example, adopting children. With regard to this contention, Ogunyemi states categorically what is expected of an African woman and a womanist. African womanist writers have to root their writings in the black context. "It's ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power" of



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being a father, brother, mother, sister or any other sort of social stratification that brings power to an individual ("Womanism" 72). Her views are further supported by Arndt who, referring to Ogunyemi's view on motherhood, comments that the point of departure for African womanists as different from their African-American counterparts is their "obsession to have children" (712).

Conforming to Ogunyemi and Arndt's ideas, Forna represents female characters that are proud of being mothers. They value motherhood as the sole institution that distinguishes them from men and therefore gives them power over men. While Ogunyemi in her theorisation of womanism recognizes the presence of men in the institution of motherhood, the narrative of *Ancestor stones* pushes them to the periphery. They are silenced and made invisible in the narrative as if they don't have anything to do with motherhood. We see Asana's daughter, Adie, and Asana's granddaughter, Adama being pregnant at different times, but the novel does not show the men who are responsible for those pregnancies. Men are only needed by women when they want to have babies. Here Asana indirectly introduces a "win-win" form of gender role negotiation where, at different times, a man and a woman need each other. In this way, the narrative discourages marriage. It creates a single parent family structure headed by a woman. Asana says: "In my dreams I lived in this house with my children, everybody fat and smiling … Nowhere. You see, in my dream there was no man. Just me and my house and my children. And I knew I was as happy as I ever would be" (244). It was a dream but later becomes a reality. After the death of her husband, Asana refuses to marry again despite the pressure from her aunts. By so doing, she navigates her way by refusing to accept the patriarchal system engineered by her aunts. She decides to lead her own life by living like "mambores"—to mean a woman who lives like a man—refusing the societal conventionalised traits on what is expected of a woman. She divides her time between selling in her shop and staying with her daughter (Adie), granddaughter (Adama) and her great granddaughter. This signifies the new direction in which the novel has ventured in the course of fighting for women's empowerment. It has revisited Ogunyemi's womanist approach by pushing men to the periphery, as I have argued elsewhere in order to avoid competition with women in their struggle for gender balance.

Instead, Asana embarks on trading activities as a way of navigating her way through patriarchal dominance. She agrees with Susan Andrade's contention that West African women have historically been visible in the public sphere. As Andrade notes, "West African women in particular are famous as traders, and they have had enormous influence over the domestic economy by setting prices and controlling the availability of goods" (92). Forna portrays Asana as a woman ready to cast off the traditional ties that limit women to the domestic space. She is close to Madam Turay, a business woman, who draws her into business. Madam Turay makes Asana consider trading activities as the only means that can enable her to rid herself of the



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patriarchal yoke. Her travelling from Sierra Leone to Lagos and Accra to buy clothes for sale back home enables her to meet with women from other countries. Asana says, "We stayed with four other women. Two from Ghana. One from Guinea. Another from Upper Volta. All doing the same thing we were doing. All traders" (243). The narrative tells us that the time has come for women to engage in trading activities. In their trading activities, the novel calls for cooperation and solidarity among women. For example, Sarah cooperates with Madam Turay and they manage to open their own store, namely "Kholifa Turay Cloth Merchants" (244). Such advancement in business enables women to make decisions not only in arranging prices for goods as Andrade suggests, but also having a voice in the public sphere. That is why even other female characters such as Serah, Mariama, and Asana opt for politics, teaching and business respectively so as to have a space where their voices can be heard. Through their professional cadres, they can challenge not only the socio-cultural activities that suppress women, but also participate in economic activities and can have an authoritative voice to comment on the state of the postcolonial nation.

The novel also bridges the gap between white and black people. It considers biracial marriage as one of the ways women can adopt in order to extend their power beyond the geopolitical national boundaries. Forna creates a society where racism is no longer the talk of the day. Among the tenets of black womanism Ogunyemi advocates is the incorporation of racism in African women's writing. Ogunyemi considers African women triply disadvantaged: by being victimized by white patriarchal power, by black men and by being victims on racial, sexual and class grounds by white men (67). In *Ancestor stones,* Abie marries a Scottish husband. Forna portrays Abie's family as stable and "admired by [Abie's] family and friends" (8) in Sierra Leone. While in Sierra Leone, Abie's aunts call her husband "the Portuguese One, the *potho*, which has become [her] people's word for any European" (8). It is interesting to note that Abie's husband reminds the Sierra Leoneans of their former colonial masters. They left wounds that are not easily healed. They "set up trading posts. Bred bronze-coloured Pedros and Marias. And disappeared leaving scattered words as remnants of their stay" (8). However, the narrative does not give enough details about Abie's family with her husband or how the family is structured. In addition, readers could expect to understand the Sierra Leoneans' xenophobic feelings against the Portuguese. However, the narrative removes these doubts by showing how Abie, her husband and children behave even when they are in Rofathane village. They work together planting coffee and manage to establish their own estate namely Kholifa Estate. Therefore, the narrative uses marriage as a tool for negotiating identities between white and black people. Since the majority of Sierra Leoneans cannot distinguish Europeans in terms of their nationalities, Abie has united Africa and Europe. They produce children who are in a space between Africa and Europe.



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## Conclusion

Forna's *Ancestor stones* revisits the family structure and space. In the process, it shows that African women writers find themselves negotiating the power struggle between men and women. The narrative begins by tracing the history of the family structure and how it has been changing over time with the influence of socio-political, economic and cultural changes. It shows the different strategies traditional African women used in negotiating for power in the family. The novel underscores the institution of polygyny as a space where women could meet and negotiate for power with men. The aim was to lessen the burden of handling the traditional gender roles. An alternative to this negotiation is found in *Ancestor stones* when the contemporary African women in the novel devise a way of modifying the negotiation tools such as engaging in trading activities, divorce, and bi-racial marriage.

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**Notes**

1. In this paper, I use the term "contemporary" to denote twenty-first century narratives, i.e. writers who entered the writing arena in the 2000s.
2. Modou Fally, the husband of the protagonist of the novel, Ramatoulaye in *So long a letter*, married the young Aisatou who is the age-mate of his daughter and deserted his senior wife.
3. Nwapa's eponymous character, Efuru, in *Efuru* (unlike Forna's characters, especially the four cousins) takes a wife as a way to conform to the traditional system that disregards "barren" women.
4. Nnaemeka uses the term "philosophy of evacuation" to mean rejection. In this context, it means rejection of motherhood.

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