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From Cultural Labyrinths to Social Transformation: Young Women's Struggles in Sahndra Fon Dufe's *Yefon: The Red Necklace*

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Abstract

Women in Africa are negatively affected by cultural practices which impede their social participation and identity formation. Set in the form of defined gender roles, these practices, which are designed to maintain social cohesion, are far from ensuring protection and participation particularly for women. This paper explores, from this background, the intricate journey of young women as they navigate the dual realms of tradition and modernity in Sahndra FonDufe's (2016) novel, *Yefon: The Red Necklace*. Central to this exploration is the protagonist's struggle for identity formation, set against a backdrop of cultural norms and the burgeoning influence of modern ideas. The study delves into how young women confront and reconcile the often conflicting demands of traditional expectations and their aspirations influenced by modern ideals. The study is based on an interpretative analysis built on an African feminist framework to examine how young women in the novel sail through tradition to embrace more fulfilling forms of being. This was done from two critical perspectives - a survey of the practices that hold them captive and an analysis of their move towards social transformation.

1. Introduction

African women face unique challenges in identity development and social transfiguration particularly within patriarchal structures. These structures are designed in accordance with cultural demands, which from time immemorial, give precedence to male normativity. This system both oppresses women and denies them equal rights and opportunities with men. It is within this context that their desire to contest such structures and break free to a more

dignified and fulfilling life is read and understood.

Ajala (2016, p.2) observes that the perception of women as naturally unequal to men gives rise to arbitrary social constructions of gender roles in which men are positioned first; dominating in the economic and political spheres, while women occupy the domestic front, which consist of menial endeavours that do not produce any economic or political reward. Evidently, this leads to an unequal distribution of wealth in favour of men. This, in effect, is the image of the woman in the developing African world carried over from previous centuries, and to make it worse, debates surrounding the position of women in such societies are not too welcome, not to say taboo, so to maintain them in a subservient position and supposing a near impossibility for them to change this narrative. The status quo in such societies present the male as more powerful, both physically and mentally, and more rational than the woman. As a consequence, young girls were groomed to see their relationships with males as the only uplifting events in their lives, restricting ambition, creativity and career. In relation to this, Adichie complains:

> We say to girls, you can have ambition but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man … we raise girls to see each other as competitors not for jobs or accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing, but for the attention of men. (Adichie, 2014, p.15)

It is judged from the above excerpt that society uses its constituents of culture, mostly beliefs about women, the family and marriage, to restrict and compel women to little ambition, effort, self-autonomy and assertion, which are primordial for individual freedom and social transformation. The society's blindness on the various potential and competences possessed by women accounts for the pejorative treatment which they are subjected to, and which further limits their ability to be more productive for the society.

But most outstanding is the privileged position accorded the male and the disregard with which the reality of the woman's mind and biology are treated. This prejudice against women has attracted concern from African writers among whom are Alobwed'Epie (2005) in *The Lady with the Beard*, Anne Tanyi Tang (2000) in *Ewa and other Plays*, Bole Butake (1990) in *And Palm Wine will Flow*, Osonye Tess Owueme (1990 in *Tell it to Women*, who have addressed the issue from a wide range of perspectives, though with particular focus on the barriers against women and their struggles for social transformation.

From a theoretical standpoint, African feminists have come up with various interpretations and models to capture women's experiences and fight for women's rights. African feminism, Motherism, Womanism, Nego Feminism, Snail-Sense Feminism and Stiwanism are some of such models. For his part, Amaefula (2021) underlines the distinctiveness of African feminism as relying on its social and humanistic thrust – promoting economic, political and legal participation of women. Adichie (2014) adds to this perspective by recommending a flexible society that is interested in what women can offer for societal building, basing on the fact that they too are endowed with knowledgeable, creative and innovative competencies. From a holistic perspective, African Feminism opts for the inclusion and social participation

of women in nation building and at the same time, insists on maintaining and preserving traditional values related to family, motherhood and sisterhood.

Furthermore, the variant, Stiwanism, developed by Ogundipe (1994, p.1) opts for complementarity of both men and women for a positive transformation of both the woman and society. She emphasises that it is not about warring with men, but trying to build a harmonious society which, by the way, is the responsibility of every member of the society. This stance of Stiwanism closely links with that of Nego-Feminism, which focuses on negotiation and compromise with patriarchal values and practices that oppress women. Nnaemeka (2005), the proponent of this model, bases her assumption on the fact that men and women need each other to survive, develop and sustain society. For this reason, the problems faced by women in Africa, which are inarguably mostly patriarchal, are to be discussed and an agreement that will facilitate female integration in patriarchal structures reached. However, Ezeigbo (2015) comes in again to emphasise on the female's pursuit of self-empowerment. In her viewpoint of Snail-Sense Feminism, she insists on individual success and development as central tenets with the idea that a woman's success naturally extends to the family and society. In all, these different models of African Feminism have as major goal women's empowerment and development beyond limiting and detrimental practices of patriarchy.

Other feminist pro-actors have joined their voices with feminist theorists to critically analyse women's issues from sociological and literary perspectives. Klaa (2020), for example, examines the challenges African women face in their unjust social heritage, the discriminative practices both in terms of the market and the gender. Lack of ownership of production resources, limited entrepreneurship, unequal sharing of family resources are some of these challenges. This predicament is both a direct cause and consequence of their dependence on men for economic stability. However, encouraging women's self-employment projects, their participation in decision making, adopting education for girls are some of the ways through which women can become agents of change and socio-economic development.

On the literary plane, Begum (2017) carried out a study on Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and specifically notes the exploitation, exclusion and silencing that characterise women's lives. Additionally, she observes, in the novel, other forms of oppression through excruciating experiences of wifehood, motherhood and obligatory marriage. That notwithstanding, Begum agnises Adichie's move beyond women's confinement to gender and sexuality and sees education and women solidarity as forms of social transformation. In like manner, Nwiyi and Edache (2020) underscore that the patriarchal expectations of women hinder them from pursuing their dreams. In order for them to assert themselves and reinvent a significant image of the African woman, they should be proactive and engage in a complementary relationship with men. Abbas (2022) complements both Begum (2017) and Nwiyi and Edache (2020) by studying women in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) as ambitious, self-defined, courageous and rebellious, giving them a different image of the hitherto subservient, docile and silenced role they have always been condemned to. According to him, the gateway to independence and self-empowerment lies in the trust of their capacities to break away from the prison of self-hate and victimisation to self-confidence and self-respect. These, as Abbas remarks, can

be fully achieved through education and female solidarity.

From the above attempts at theorizing women's struggles, and similar attempts to participate/engage in self-empowering activities, it is evident that there is a disparity between men and women in African societies, which hinders women from thriving on the same opportunities as men. This ever-present cultural quagmire is raised in FonDufe's (2016) *Yefon: The Red Necklace*, in which readers are exposed to a culture that puts limits to female empowerment, self-fulfillment and efficient participation in social development. The bias with which young women in the novel are treated in Nso land has contributed to the conceptions of this work, which also aims to examine the ways in which Nso culture impedes the young woman's personal development, and the different responses of the characters both in personality building and in transcending or breaking the hurdles for a more accommodating and complementary society. As observed in the works of the critics discussed above, the dominant trend in an effort to achieve social transformation is through education and female solidarity, which forms part of the discussions in this paper.

2. Cultural Labyrinths

As indicated above, every society is governed by a set of values.These values are put in place in accordance with beliefs and patterns of behaviour. These values, according to Ngugi (1983, p.4), are the basis of the community's consciousness, their world outlook and their collective and individual image of self. Generally, African societies are patriarchal in nature and the Nso community from which FonDufe writes is no exception. In this society, gender roles are defined and prescriptions are made for attitudes and behaviours for both men and women. As expected of patriarchal societies, men own and wield power while women and children bow to the dictates of the men. From this disadvantaged position, whatever potential or ability a woman possesses does not bloom, and is quelled with impunity, such that personal attempts at social development for collective progress are frustrated. Thus, the women are held captive in a labyrinth from which neither physical nor psychological escape seem achievable.

Yefon: The Red Necklace, presents the quintessential nature of an exemplary family in Nso land. Shey Labam has four wives and eleven legitimate children, with Yefon being the major protagonist and narrator. The precision on "eleven legitimate children" (FonDufe, 2016, p.14) suggests that Shey Labam has other children out of his four wives. Having other children not by his wives is a prerogative of the Nso man and does not have to be questioned since being polygamous gives him the latitude to have as many wives and concubines at his disposal and under his command notwithstanding the rivalry that might erupt amongst them. As if having to share a man is not sufficient, these women are expected to work together, whether at home or in the farm, to ensure the sanity and harmony of the family. Generally, they do, not because they love one another but because culture obliges them to. A case in point in the novel is when Shey Labam holds a feast in his compound prior to his departure on a business trip. Yefon narrates, "the women collectively spiced the meat in the backyard, but Ma was particularly in charge of cutting and washing off the flesh as first wife. Wives did assignments in that order" (FonDufe, 2016, p.14). The expectations of working in tandem are however flawed by the conflicts and prejudices among them. Kpulajey, the last wife is

taunted by Ya Buri, the third wife, for having lost both of her children shortly after birth. Again, because of this mishap, the community brands her a witch. This happens because Nso culture is oblivious to the biological causes of child mortality and so does not provide protection for women who are victims. Rather, the culture reinforces the belief that childless women are responsible for their situation by engaging in witchcraft or sorcery. This puts the victims in a traumatic mental state resulting from constant provocation, insults and isolation.

Such beliefs on women work against them and ironically, are sometimes perpetuated by the same women folk, not because they harbour hatred for one another but because they are struggling for men's and society's approval. In many African cultures, a woman's femininity is measured by her ability to bear children, which is also one of the major determinants of a successful marriage; a woman gets married only to become a mother. Thus motherhood, achieved through connection with the male, gives the African woman her primary identity. That is why Ya Buri can afford to mock her co-wife and take pride in her ability to biologically mother, as she particularly notes her daughter's (Sola) extreme beauty, seeing her as the ideal choice for a prince. Yet Shey Labam seems unconcerned about the rivalry and tension amongst his wives, taking pleasure and interest only in his business pursuits and initiation of his sons in the business, having made a name for himself as the most successful businessman in Shisong. His wives' only contribution to his fame is bearing sons for him, who will help in fostering the enterprise and to whom certainly it will be bequeathed. The absence and exclusion of his wives in his business ventures definitely leans on the assumption that women are good only for domestic and farm chores, and in this role, their relationship with him is limited such that they do not get to discuss anything out of the domestic sphere with him. The distance between Shey Labam and his wives is widened by the fact that he does not live in his hut "with any of his wives [but] … with some of his older sons (FonDufe, 2016, p.20). This fact of sharing his hut with his sons reinforces the idea of women being considered only for their motherhood role in Nso land. Once that is fulfilled, no meaningful contribution is expected from them. Curiously, the women themselves do not feel ill at ease for not sharing their husband's hut with him probably because they have been groomed to understand and accept the situation the way it is.

Women are kept in the home not only to keep house but also to ensure continuity and perpetration of this trend and as such, they are consciously or unconsciously being placed at the core of their own oppression and limitation. Brainwashed with the notion that girls and boys are in essence different, even from their origins, abilities and behaviours, mothers remind daughters and sisters remind sisters of this argument, which though fallacious has an overwhelming impact on women and young girls. Molestane & Ntombela (2010) blame this overpowering influence on the rural milieu in which these women grow up. According to them, rural settings are known to propagate gender roles, expectations, norms and values and socialisation follows these patterns. Since the family is the first place of socialisation, it stands as the hub of social and cultural constructions of gender. It is from this premise that we understand Ma, Yefon's mother's, advise to Yefon not to compare herself with boys saying, "you are different from them you know …. The gods made us from their ribs …. If we were meant to be equal, they would have manufactured us from their shoulder" (FonDufe, 2016,

p.35). On the other side, Kadoh, Yefon's half-sister discourages her when she begins developing interest in school. Kadoh emphasises, "if a woman goes to school, she would not be able to give birth because she is despising the wisdom of the gods" (FonDufe, 2016, p.26). Respecting and consolidating these cultural beliefs and prescriptions through perpetual reminders automatically creates bumps to whatever aspirations the girl child might hold. And because she should not dream of anything more than being a wife and mother, the cycle continues.

Ma is the prototype of a typical Nso mother. She embodies stereotypical and bias conceptions of womanhood and raises her children in accordance with gender expectations and to fulfil prescribed roles. She beats the roles into Yefon in addition to her constant reminders for Yefon to master her household tasks, emphasising that these are what will determine success in her marital home. "Business is not for women. We are not supposed to sit in such gatherings" (FonDufe, 2016, p.15); school is no place to worry about (FonDufe, 2016, p.26); "there are things meant for men, and things meant for women. The two don't mix" (FonDufe, 2016, p.26); "women should not meddle in the affairs of men … women are women and men are men" (FonDufe, 2015, p.44). These are some of the endless reverberations that serve as cautions to young girls and women to know and accept their place and position within the Nso cultural and social environment.

Deduced from the relationship between young girls and their mothers, marriage, according to Nso culture, is the thing for which a girl must be raised up. Every single behaviour and attitude a young girl acquires must be related to marriage (her relationship with a man) and motherhood. Adichie grumbles about this situation saying:

> Because I am a female, I'm expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important thing, a source of joy, love and mutual support. But why do we teach young girls to aspire for marriage, yet we don't teach young boys the same? (Adichie, 2014, p.7)

The prejudices against young girls and women are evident in Adichie's (2014) grievance when she asks why boys are not also prepared for marriage the way girls are. This question is somehow rhetorical as it speaks to the bias and nonchalance with which women were treated. It is obvious that what attitude a male puts up in his home should not be questioned since he is the head of the house and has the singular privilege of deciding how to run his home and at every stage of the decision, the woman is expected to be submissive and docile.

These challenges that women face in patriarchal cultures are no doubt stifling to their ambitions and personal growth and development; but more inhibiting is the fact of being a female albino. The myths and stereotypes surrounding albinism are still very much clouded by stigma and superstitions in African societies. People suffering from this skin pigmentation are most often considered cursed and/or associates of bad spirits, and sometimes as harbingers of prosperity and wealth when sacrificed. Yenla, Yefon's sister, is unfortunate to have been born with this rare skin pigmentation and this condition exposes her to the impulses and caprices of the community and particularly of the soothsayers, who ignorant of

this medical condition, see her as an appropriate and juicy sacrifice to the gods. One of such soothsayers, described as "speaker of the most feared spirit from the Nkuv forests" (FonDufe, 2016, p.88) comes demanding Yenla from Shey Labam to use as food for the gods. He says:

> … people of Nkuv are dying and your daughter is needed for a sacrifice to appease the spirits … whether she eats a live snake, drinks pee or eats her own faeces, she must be sacrificed else she will die from the anger of the gods. There is no other way (FonDufe, 2016, p.88).

There is no doubt that the stereotypes regarding albinism result from a fundamental and persistent misconception of the condition since there is no cultural explanation to it. The soothsayer reveals his ignorance of this condition when he attests that "even the oldest men of the clan know not of its origins" (FonDufe, 2016, p.88). This comes after several attempts to heal her prove futile. Yet the misconception about the disease remained, and was so strong that even Sabo who eventually marries Yenla does so not out of love, but out of the false belief that she will be a source of wealth to him. When this does not happen, he brings her back in disappointment and fury – "'I heard that *Ntov* (meaning albino in Nso language) had special juice that could give a man more power' Sabo complained bitterly before spitting out angrily, 'it was all lies'" (FonDufe, 2016, p.138).

Any other man in Sabo's place would have behaved the same way given the beliefs surrounding albinos. It is this same fallacy that pushes the two Nigerians in the text to attempt a kidnap of Yenla, confessing that her body parts "would sell for a fortune" (FonDufe, 2016, p.91). Clearly, the handicap of being born an albino is fatal as they are easy targets for killing and mutilation because of the widespread belief across Africa that their body parts favour potent charms for becoming influential in society. Chu (2015) confirms this problem with albino hunting in a study on myths about the albino in Africa, which reveals that albino hunters killed over 207 albinos with over 70 documented cases in 2007. He adds that a set of arms, legs, ears and genital of an albino could sell for as much as 75.000USD. From these presumptions about the inherent mystical strength of albinos, Baker (2008, p.113) tries to understand the symbolism that black Africans accord to albinism – a link to the spirit world or a marker of difference and deviance – and comes to a logical inference that "underlying all such interpretations of albinism is a failure for what it is – a medical condition."

As bad as Yenla's albino situation is, she still experiences oppression as a female. One of the reasons Sabo advances for bringing her back to her parents is that she has not been able to give him a male child. For this, she is spited and branded a witch. "I want a son, not a daughter! Your daughter is a witch who has eaten up all her male children. What am I doing with a girl?" (FonDufe, 2016, p.138) he retorts. Sabo's angry reaction is driven by the culturally based belief that a man can only benefit full male status of "a man" in Nso society when he has male offspring. Since Yenla falls short of this expectation, Sabo feels deprived of that privilege and opportunity and blames Yenla perhaps for his own inadequacies. As Hendl & Browne (2019) note in their study on gender disappointment, parents feel sad when they have a child of a non-desirable sex. They blame this sadness on a prevailing dominant gender

normative view held in society, and African societies being mostly patriarchal, give preference to male offspring thus disappointment accompanies the birth of only female offspring with the woman always taking the blame.

The perpetual misjudgements, stigma and social exclusion that Yenla deals with from a culture that negates her both as an albino and a female, contribute greatly in frustrating her and shaping her introvert and eremite personality. From childhood through adolescence to womanhood, she suffers embarrassing and threatening stereotypes which leave her with a perpetually bored expression on her pallid face as she seldom spoke. The few occasions the author offers her to speak are fraught with stammers and splotches thus leaving her in a pejorative psychological state - choosing to isolate rather than defend herself. Her lack of voice, added to her inability to face the stressful experiences result to an unconscious internalization of her ascribed defect and thus submission to the dictates of her culture and society. This situation inevitably has psychological effects on her: shyness, timidity, fear, which culminate into low self-esteem. Such experiences as Yenla faces have been studied and theorised by Roy et al (2003). They posit that children who are exposed to stress and trauma have difficulties expressing emotions and regulating identity. This definitely affects their personalities and ability to relate with others. No doubt then that Yenla can only express her emotions through sobs.

The author's use of diction that reveal Yenla's sad psychological state: "pallid," "cursed," "frustrated," "fright," "weak," "afraid," "scared," "cries" (FonDufe, 2016, p.15, p.15, p.47, p.89, p.90, p.91, p.91, p.139) reinforces the degree to which some cultural malpractices and wrong judgements are harmful to the individual psyche and thus do not permit for any meaningful development and assertion of self. In almost all of black Africa, children with unknown illnesses like albinism continuously experience marginalization and stigmatisation resulting to slim possibilities for self enhancement and acceptance. Even to this day, myths on albinism are still prevalent in many African communities, causing the bias and hostility with which such individuals, particularly women, are treated. And though the consequence of such negativity on this disability are unfathomable, and even with the increasing sensitisation of its genetic roots, some Africans still find it hard to erase the old belief.

From the foregone discussions, the excesses of polygamy, the bias that comes with childlessness and male child preference, lack of economic opportunities, albinism and other stringent cultural expectations/roles are painful experiences for women in Africa. Yet, there is a need to transcend the propaganda of such practices so that the African woman's status can be attractive. For this to happen, a number of elements have to be considered including collective gender effort to build self-awareness and self confidence in women; give them voice so that they can speak up to the challenges and clumsiness of some cultural practices that oppress them and provide an opportunity for them to exploit and explore their potentials for both individual and socio-cultural growth.

3. "Be You"

This utterance goes beyond the assertiveness, aspirations and ambitions in young women's struggles for independence. It resonates with vehemence and strength of will as it sends a

strong signal to young women on their way to freedom from oppressive cultural beliefs. Over the decades, women have faced unique and complex challenges that hinder their self-assertiveness and empowerment. But as they become increasingly aware of this lack, they tend to develop strategies to overcome them.

Recent writings on African women effectively contribute to redefining the woman and her position in society. FonDufe's (2016) novel falls within this category of writing that expresses the Africa woman's plight, while subtly advocating for a change of perspective. The first step towards this is putting Yefon at the centre of the narrative; taking her close to only those male characters who support her vision while her interactions with the other female characters in the novel reveal female oppression and justify her leap towards freedom.

Interestingly, FonDufe creates Yefon in the image of Ngonnso, the founder of the Nso dynasty who happened to be a woman. Ngonnso was strong, courageous, resilient, defiant and determined to follow her brothers in the search for new settlements even when they waved her off as just being a woman. But the fact of being a woman did not impede her desire to find a new place. For the fact that Yefon is endowed with Ngonnso's character traits, added to her spiritual connection to this legendary woman through the red necklace, Yefon can be considered the reincarnation of Ngonnso. From Ngonnso's personality, we assume that women were supposed to enjoy some privileges by virtue of their kind being at the helm of the history of the Nso people, and that women are presumably more spiritual since Yefon receives signals from Ngonnso through the red necklace. Disappointingly, however, this was not the case as the society once fully established, soon returned to its patriarchal status from which Ngonnso originated and gave the woman a second-class position. However, FonDufe attempts to reconstitute and renew this original narrative by making Yefon the chosen one with the idea that if a woman can be the founder of the land, then another woman can also lead the people out of the cultural stringency that blocks women from manifesting their potential for communal progress.

Yefon's attachment to the spirit of Ngonnso is first witnessed during her birth, which is characterized by controversies and uncertainty about her survival. Even the midwives declare that she would not make it but curiously, her father sees in her the chosen one. It is at this point that he begins his role as mediator between the spirit of Ngonnso and Yefon; acting as catalyst to Yefon's quest for freedom and empowerment in diverse ways.

First, Shey Labam offers Yefon security and boundless love, defending her against everyone including her own mother. Their relationship is increasingly being enhanced by mutual trust as time passes and when Yefon comes of age, he begins prophesying to her with such utterances as, "you have a great path ahead of you" (FonDufe, 2016, p.20), "one day, you will leap so far and do something special for Nso people" (FonDufe, 2016, p.20), "[you] … will eat with kings" (FonDufe, 2016, p.44), "you must remember that you are special and don't be afraid to be yourself because no one else can do what you do better than you" (FonDufe, 2016, p.45), "my sunshine" (FonDufe, 2016, p.62), " you have a great path in front of you; one larger than most of the women in this village" (FonDufe, 2016, p.76). The power of these words from Shey Labam positively influence Yefon; consciously or unconsciously

strengthening her self-esteem as she feels like she "could conquer the world" (FonDufe, 2016, p.20). Yefon's reaction to the constructive influence of her father's utterances, as seen in her own comments, sets the basis for her acknowledgement of self-worth, determination, courage and resilience to push through with her ambitions. More especially, the statement, "you are the one Yefon Labam" (FonDufe, 2016, p.76), does not only speak to an identity and personality that must be asserted but also indicates a potential and dream that must be fulfilled both for herself and for the entire community. This is re-echoed in the utterance, "Be You" (FonDufe, 2016, p.45), which comes with renewed confidence, joy, fortitude and psychological stability that favour action.

Second, Shey Labam offers Yefon two very significant gifts that further propel her desire for empowerment – the red necklace which allegedly belonged to Ngonnso hundreds of years before, and the cave containing some books which, as it were, will bring "freedom for her mind" (FonDufe, 2016, p.83). The choice of Yefon as torch-bearer of women's freedom in Nso land, made achievable by Ngonnso, speaks to the continuation of the legacy of liberation which women represent since the beginning of the history of Nso land. Red, as a colour, symbolises strength, power, fearlessness and resilience, all traits which Ngonnso equips Yefon with so that her ambitions can be fulfilled. But this fulfilment can only be guaranteed with an education. That is why the author introduces the idea of books though Yefon has no clue of how to read or write. That notwithstanding, the simple thought that there is knowledge in the books that can foster liberation for women, is enough for Yefon to cling to them. Her thirst and pursuit of that liberating knowledge leads her to Kome, who comes in as another significant episode in her journey towards fulfilling her desire for social justice for herself and for the entire womenfolk as well.

The encounter with Kome offers Yefon another dimension of understanding herself-worth and perception. Kome introduces her to reading and writing, with her name as a starting point. Added to its exhilarating influence, writing and reading YEFON also has a major effect on her sense of self and identity. A name, being the primary identity marker, carries with it self-knowledge, worth, understanding, pride, behavioural patterns and profound personal, familial, cultural and even historical connections. "Yefon" literarily means "mother of the Fon", the Fon being the overall ruler of the land. In most African cultures, the maiden to birth the future ruler of the land is always carefully chosen, with reflections on the values of the people. Morality, firmness of character and spiritual connection to the land are vital elements to be considered. Readers then understand why Yefon is betrothed to the prince of the land, and hopefully in her position as future queen mother, who by tradition is the only woman who sits in council with the Fon and the notables, she will be opportune to propose and effect the necessary change in the statute of women in Nso land. Presumably, therefore, reading and writing her name and the feeling of awe that accompanies this accomplishment, gives her a full understanding of its implications. The result is her resolve to equip herself with more knowledge in preparation for the challenges ahead.

By bringing in Shey Labam and Kome to act as stimuli to Yefon's desire for freedom and empowerment, FonDufe is endorsing Chiweshe's (2018) view that African men can be pro-feminists – acting as collaborators to promote women's empowerment and potential. This

further explains why Emecheta explicitly states that she does not subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive and so must be rejected. There are fathers, brothers and sons amongst these men (qtd Mikell, 1995). This insinuates that there is an unbroken attachment to first degree male relatives and this attachment promotes harmony between sexes in the domestic sphere, which may be replicated at the larger community level . The bond between Shey Labam and his daughter, Yefon, lays bare Emecheta's intimation, for it is his conviction of her greatness and her trust in his security, that she is able to face the society. Ezeigbo (2015) picks up from here to accentuate on the need for a conciliatory approach to women's struggles where men are co-partners rather than enemies to women's empowerment. As evident in the discussions on Kome's relationship with Yefon, complementarity and collaboration are fostered thus his active participation in the positive transformation of women's lives.

That notwithstanding, part of the success of women's endeavours towards empowerment lies in their ability to bond and engage in a collective fight. Oyewumi (2021) confirms this strategy by admitting that sisterhood is one of the dominant models for feminism which speaks to women's activism. This is boosted by a shared experience of oppression, suppression and general victimisation. It is therefore the responsibility of the woman to support and defend other women who may be going through different forms of oppression. In the novel, this responsibility is given to Yefon, who understands early in life that there is a wide gap between males and females in her community with the females accorded lesser empowerment opportunities. This responsibility is accompanied with strength of character which she uses to good effect to meet up with the challenges. Amongst all the young women characters in the novel, she is virtually the only one who fights against the injustices meted on her kind.

Adenji (2015, p.35) earlier stated that "sisterhood bonding essentially advocates the cooperation of females in the society. In other words, women and girls are expected to collaborate with their own in any venture – social, political, economic and filial." This implicitly reveals that women are the first and most engaged actresses in their battle against cultural setbacks and towards personal fulfilment. And to achieve this, individuality should be discarded and synergy preserved for the maximisation of potential for a powerful impact on cultural change. It is in accordance with this principle that Yefon severally stands up for Yenla, whose albino status reduces her to a dull, lack-lustre and docile young girl. From when the soothsayer comes to take her away for ritual purposes through when other girls taunt her to when her husband ends their marriage, Yefon declares to her, "I am here to protect you" (FonDufe, 2016, p.89). Yefon's show of love and care for her sister is pushed by an understanding of the trauma she is experiencing for being a female and an albino, which trauma has beaten her to the marrow. Yefon's position deviates from the general belief, which other women also hold, that albinism is a mark of evil and must be treated as such. Even without knowledge of the biological irregularities that cause albinism, Yefon greatly considers Yenla's femaleness and above all her humanity as factors necessitating a defense.

As expected, her actions have a positive therapeutic impact on Yenla. Firstly, she overcomes the stressful situations by deeply expressing gratitude to Yefon and they both feel a renewed

bond of sisterhood. Together, they find solace in motherhood through Asheri, her daughter, who becomes a source of solace and healing to them as they dedicate time, energy and resources to her. These help Yenla regain a measure of self-confidence and thus she begins a life of economic independence. As Bryan-Davis (2013) theorises, there is therapeutic value in sister friends. He emphasizes that such relationships are crucial in assisting women of diverse ethnic backgrounds, particularly women of African descent, to face, address and overcome major stressful and traumatic transitions in their walk towards autonomy. Sisterhood is therefore very relevant in strengthening the weak ones. Through such bonding, even the culturally rejected ones like Yenla find a reason to assert themselves and move towards self and social development. It is therefore not for nothing that FonDufe (2016) authenticates solidarity, love and group protection as traits needed by young females to cast off the cultural stereotypes with which they have been clothed over the centuries.

Apart from sisterhood bonding, FonDufe equips some of her young women characters with entrepreneurial skills to show how industrious and financially responsible women can be, contrary to general belief that only men can engage in income-generating activities. For decades now, the woman's economic status has been identified as one of the major hindrances of self-assertion. It is only when a woman is self-reliant, resourceful and financially independent of the man that she can "boldly exercise the right to choose between alternatives open to her" (Achufusi, 1994, p.160). Yefon and Kadoh begin the journey of financial autonomy through their creative and entrepreneurial mindsets soon after the death of Shey Labam. They weave baskets and recycle waste into beautiful ornaments to sell and earn money decently for themselves and their siblings. When these are not enough, Yefon takes up a job as a maid in the parish. In as much as some critics would say being a maid is demeaning, it is nonetheless a step towards self-assertion and financial independence. All these help them in resisting male dominance and significantly, it is the savings from Yefon's job that provides the means for her to refund Yenla's bride price when the husband comes reclaiming. Part of FonDufe's (2016) agenda on the importance of financial independence in female struggles against repressive socio-cultural norms are evident in Yefon's determination to free her sister from patriarchal bondage in the form of marriage.

Yefon and Kadoh then become representations and symbols of young women's empowerment, self-actualisation and freedom from oppressive gender roles. From this representation, FonDufe (2016) genuinely deconstructs the prejudiced assumption that women are only good for the domestic sphere. To further give women more worth and value than society and culture do, the author juxtaposes the industriousness of the girls with the indolence of their brothers. Yefon notes, "… none of my brothers had any kind of ambitions. They were all lazy and lacked motivation" (FonDufe, 2016, p.105). "Ndze was practically useless, getting girls pregnant all over the place" (FonDufe, 2016, p.107). Ironically and somewhat disappointingly, Shey Labam dedicated all his energy in introducing them to his business; always taking them along on his business trips. This is in obedience to the supposition that, as men, it is their responsibility to continue the family business while the women remain docile and subservient to them. Ndze uses this position of privilege that culture assigns to males to victimize, prey on and oppress helpless young girls. He embodies the continuation of the legacy of

patriarchal domination of women and to show disapproval of this trend, the author takes him off the narrative after Yefon's comment.

In opposition to the unscrupulousness of Ndze, symbolic prestige is given to Yefon and Kadoh by presenting them as efficient and proactive contributors to both family and societal development/welfare; as women with vision and clear economic strategies to achieve positively defined purposes of developing themselves and the society as well. This is done to valorise the place of the woman both in the family circle and the society at large. Entrepreneurship then becomes a solution for women suffering under the yoke of limiting cultural prescriptions. As Mukorera (2020) notes, entrepreneurship fosters and reshapes women's status in society, and deconstructs gender bias. It gives them an opportunity to access and control their independence, presses on their empowerment and ensures a sustainable and equitable management of financial resources. The push for financial independence can therefore be seen as a response to the cultural/social exclusion in decision-making, low worth and bias experienced by young girls and women. It is probably for this reason that Byod (2000) describes women of African descent as survivalist entrepreneurs. Though he makes this description with reference to African-American women, it also applies to women on the African continent since they experience similar exclusion, suppression and bias. This is what increases and strengthens their desire for empowerment, self-fulfilment and freedom.

It however takes a defiant, strong and courageous character to move away from and resist the overpowering influence of gender stereotypes on women. It also needs an identification of these oppressive laws (discussed in the previous section) before finding ways of overcoming them. From early girlhood, Yefon develops a rebellious attitude towards expectations that she finds inhibiting to female fulfilment. One of such expectations lay in peer discussions which were generally centred on men. Yefon finds such discussions limiting and insignificant, not because the stories were in themselves uninteresting but principally because they do not contribute to any form of female empowerment. Young women's thinking has been narrowed and shaped to revolve around their ascribed and prescribed subordination to men such that any aspirations beyond that is disregarded. But the author provides Yefon with an enlightening perspective; owning a house and knowing what lay outside the village should be of primordial interest.

This thinking moves beyond the restrictions, limitations and condescending expectations of the female gender in Africa, and offers young women the opportunity of a positive and emancipating mindset. It calls on them to be ambitious, inquisitive, open-minded, to experience other ways of life that can constructively influence them for the better. When Yefon states that "the city and the woman were my new obsessions" (FonDufe, 2016, p.122), she is already envisaging liberation, the city being a symbol of freedom and emancipation given its diversified nature and opportunities. Significantly, her obsession with "the woman" is borne out of a desire to depart from the deafening, stifling and stagnating labyrinth that culture has built for women. The need to free the woman from this enclosed space is the nucleus of FonDufe's (2016) novel. Thus, when Yefon declares about her hair style: "this was the style I wanted and nobody could change it" (FonDufe, 2016, p.37) and Asheri "would not

be cut or scarified, and she would be better than the rest of us" (FonDufe, 2016, p.141), she is staging a rebellion and resistance with such vehemence that match her desire for women to speak up for themselves and free the younger generation. Her purpose is crowned by the statement: "I was destined to join the legacy of the great founders of our land and I was more than determined to get there" (FonDufe, 2016, p.195). Determination is therefore a key factor in achieving the much-desired social transformation of young women since it enhances resilience, courage, bravery, focus and potency. Though the novel ends without any significant achievement of freedom, it nonetheless opens up avenues for women to explore their potentials and poise for a better life than what culture reserves for them.

4. Conclusion

"From Cultural Labyrinths to Social Transformation" provides a profound exploration of the multifaceted struggles and resilience of young women as depicted in Sahndra Fon Dufe's *Yefon: The Red Necklace*. The novel serves as a compelling narrative that sheds light on the intricate interplay between cultural traditions and the quest for freedom, as experienced by its young female protagonist. Through the journey of Yefon, we witness the complexities of navigating a path fraught with cultural constraints and the aspiration for personal and social transformation. Her struggle is emblematic of the broader challenges faced by young women in similar contexts, who strive to find their voice and identity in societies bound by tradition yet evolving with modern influences.

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