'Woman, I promise you another destiny: The Prostitute's Role as an Agent for Change in Four Works of African Contemporary Fiction

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"'Woman, I promise you another destiny': The Prostitute's Role as an Agent for Change in Four Works of African Contemporary Fiction

A THESIS

The Honors Program
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"
and the Degree Bachelor of Arts
In the Department of English

by
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April, 1995
PROJECT TITLE: "'Woman, I promise you another destiny': The Prostitute's Role as an Agent for Change in Four African Contemporary Novels

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Enkidu: (to a harlot) "With a great curse I curse you! I will promise you a destiny to all eternity. My curse shall come on you and sudden. You shall be without a roof for your commerce, for you shall not keep house with other girls in the tavern, but do your business in places fouled by the vomit of the drunkard. Your hire will be potter's earth, your thievings will be flung into the hovel, you will sit at the crossroads in the dust of the potter's quarter, you will make your bed on the dunghill at night, and by day take your stand in the wall's shadow. Brambles and thorns will tear your feet, the drunk and the dry will strike your cheek and your mouth will ache."

Shamash (the wise god of the city): "Enkidu, why are you cursing the woman, the mistress who taught you to eat bread fit for gods and drink wine of kings? She who put upon you a magnificent garment, did she not give you glorious Gilgamesh for your companion, and has not Gilgamesh, your own brother, made you rest on a royal bed and recline on a couch at his left hand?"

Enkidu: "Woman, I promise you another destiny. The mouth which cursed you shall bless you. Kings, princes and nobles shall adore you. On your account, a man though twelve miles off will clap his hands to his thigh and his hair will twitch. For he will undo his belt and open his treasure and you shall have your desire; lapis lazuli, gold and cornelian from the heap of the treasury. A ring for your hand and a robe shall be yours. The priest will lead you into the presence of the gods. On your account, a wife, a mother of seven was forsaken."

--From Epic of Gilgamesh
Acknowledgements

--To my mother Kathleen Axtmann, my father Joseph Axtmann, and my sister Elizabeth Axtmann for your love, support, and interest in my projects; you're my own agents of change. Thanks for listening to me talk about this project for the past year, and for taking the time to ask, “How’s that thesis going?”

--To my advisor, Dr. Madhu Mitra, for your support, dedication, and enthusiasm in directing me in this project.

--To my readers, Dr. Ozzie Mayers and Dr. Kristen Vonnegut, for the time you spent commenting on my drafts and for your insightful suggestions.

--To my roommates and friends, Michelle Auers, Karen Pfeilsticker, Jill Holbrook, Rebecca Harter, and Sean Faulk, for all the stories and discussions we’ve shared in the past four years.

--To Mr. Eugene Mechelke, my high school English teacher, for teaching me the value of independent research and writing.
Introduction

They did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels, with great and generous hearts, dedicated, because of the horror of circumstance, to ameliorating the luckless, barren life of men, taking money incidentally and humbly for their “understanding.” Nor were they from that sensitive breed of young girl, gone wrong at the hands of fate, forced to cultivate an outward bitterness in order to protect her springtime from further shock, but knowing full well she was cut out for better things and could make the right man happy. Neither were they the sloppy, inadequate whores, who unable to make a living at it alone, turned to drug consumption and traffic or pimps to complete their scheme of self-destruction, avoiding suicide only to punish the memory of some absent father or sustain the memory of some silent mother. . . . They were not young girls in whores’ clothing, or whores regretting their loss of innocence. They were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence (Morrison 47-48).

Reading Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in Great Books last year, I was engaged by the portrait of three prostitutes who were content with their situation and who seemed the happiest characters in the novel. Within this portrayal, Morrison herself refers to the representations of “generations of prostitutes created in novels,” recognizing that there have been patterns involved in prior representations: those with great and generous hearts, whores who are sloppy and inadequate, girls posing as whores, and prostitutes regretting their loss of innocence. Similarly, Pierre L. Horn and Mary Beth Pringle, in their introduction to *The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature*, present a list of common representations of prostitutes by male authors. Based on their definition, I would
call Morrison's respective representations examples of the "weak-but-wonderful prostitute," otherwise known as the "whore-with-a-heart-of-gold" (Horn and Pringle 3), the "hapless harlot" (Horn and Pringle 5), part of the "cast of thousands," (Horn and Pringle 5) and the "seduced-and-abandoned prostitute" (Horn and Pringle 4). However, the prostitutes Morrison creates in *The Bluest Eye*—Miss Marie, China, and Poland—split from Horn and Pringle's pattern of depiction, becoming characters symbolic in their own right. Thriving in a poor neighborhood, these prostitutes are strong, independent women able to survive without men—figures Morrison recognizes for their ability to persist in degrading conditions. I chose to investigate portrayals of prostitutes in African novels to determine whether the portrayals were similar to Morrison's symbolic characters, and, in the process, to present a discussion of the strength of such symbolism.

In investigating these representations, it is important to provide relevant background information for examining representations of prostitutes within literature. This subject's worth arises from its questioning a North American literary tradition "reluctant to discuss the sexually wayward woman" (Hapke 6). In mid-nineteenth century North American novels, Laura Hapke maintains, some writers created strong characters whose lives were "shaped by forbidden love" (7). However, the prudishness at the end of the nineteenth century "deprived the fallen woman of whatever character and distinctiveness she had" (Hapke 7). Hapke explains the problems for an author of developing a prostitute as a character: "By her very nature the prostitute--and the fiction which dared to describe her--called into question two cherished period ideas: that woman had a
higher moral sense than man and that she was innately chaste" (13). Hapke's remarks point to the fact that stereotypical notions of prostitutes pervade literature.

As I examined *Petals of Blood, Prostitute, Jagua Nana, and Woman at Point Zero*, I kept suggested differences and similarities in the portrayals by male and female authors in mind. Horn and Pringle suggest that male authors tend to stereotype prostitutes while female authors treat them empathetically (Horn 6); according to the authors of this book, male writers usually divide prostitutes into various archetypes: "the bitch-witch, the femme fatale, the weak-but wonderful prostitute, the saved prostitute, the sinner-but survivor, the seduced-and-abandoned prostitute, the hapless harlot, the proud pro, the cast of thousands" (3-5). I took this scheme into consideration in evaluating the portrayals, considering the ways the prostitutes I examined move away from such stereotypical notions through providing symbolism and a point of view which indicate the difficulties in their societies.

Some critics have suggested that some male writers destroy the stereotypes Horn and Pringle have mentioned by granting the prostitute or fallen woman a heroic status. This destruction of stereotypes typically becomes apparent when the fallen woman possesses a political status. Discussing the Kenyan novel *Petals of Blood*, Jennifer Evans argues: "The African woman has particularly been the victim of a passive image since she suffers both colonial and male domination. Yet in Ngugi's novels women are shown to have a fundamental role in the struggle against oppression and exploitation, and often
courage and hope are ultimately found in their hands” (Evans 58). To illustrate her point, Evans shows that Ngugi’s character Wanja, a prostitute, portrays an image of the oppressed Mother Africa fighting abuse and exploitation.

Some critics of African literature have recognized the existence of prostitutes in African novels, especially for their political involvements. In Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature, Esther Smith has written that “another changing image of women with political ramifications is that of the “good-time” girls. Beyond the traditional roles of village beer-makers and single women, the introduction of prostitution is shown as a legacy of colonialism in post-independence Africa” (40). Khalid Kishtainy, writing in The Prostitute in Progressive Literature, highlights justification for a discussion of prostitution in post-independence novels:

There seems to be a marked decline now in the literary preoccupation of post-independence writers with the question of the harlot and her profession. Under the guidance of social realism and state patronage of the arts, members of the people’s militia, female tractor drivers, and heroic women of the national struggle are now the approved heroines of liberated Third World literature, To all intents and purposes, the prostitute seems to have lost the element of recognition even from her traditional patron, the artist, without gaining the promised redemption (Kishtainy 73).

Kishtainy implies that the workings of social realism and state sponsoring of the arts have refused to acknowledge prostitutes as being important figures. The prostitutes most likely are political figures if the state is refusing to sponsor their presence in novels. I do not know to what extent Kishtainy’s claim is valid, but the fact that the prostitute does not appear often in contemporary African novels
seems to validate the latter portion of Kishtainy's claim and to justify my motive in formulating a discussion around representations of prostitutes in post-independence African novels.

In addition, my discussion of the patterns of representations of prostitutes in African literature may be justified by pointing out the lack of resources and critical analyses addressing the depictions of prostitutes and their meaning in African literature. Although I did find several articles analyzing the novels I read, I was forced to develop my own theoretical framework for this project. In my search for sources for this topic, I discovered only three books related to this topic which exist in scholarly criticism: *Prostitutes in Hollywood Film*, *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature*, and *The Image of the Prostitute in Modern Literature*. *Prostitutes in Film* is a chronological compilation of North American films with prostitutes as central characters. Obviously, this book did not contribute to my study of African novels. *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature* does address two of the novels I examined, but not in any great depth, concentrating instead on the economic and political conditions which evoked the portrayals. Most importantly, *The Image of The Prostitute in Modern Literature* contains essays addressing various images of the prostitute in literature. However, this book does not address depictions on the majority of the African continent; a single essay focuses on North African and Arab-Islamic fiction; the remainder of the continent is ignored. Following the collection of essays, the book's selected bibliography of works from various countries containing
portrayals of prostitutes lacked all of the novels I read and ignored African literature altogether. The simplicity of the information available presents the need to refocus discussions of the depictions of prostitutes.10

In portrayals of prostitutes, it is significant to note the path recent representations and discussions have followed in society. Not only may portrayals of prostitutes be unrealistic, the prostitutes themselves may be ignored. Lynn Chancer, in a special issue of Social Text focusing on prostitution, constructs a hypothetical example of a feminist sociologist who has completed a Ph. D. thesis on the ethnography of prostitution to illustrate ambivalence toward the prostitution:

The work is based on participant observation... In terms of locale, the study contains an interesting comparative dimension, having been conducted both in the Netherlands and in downtown Chicago. However, participation for the dissertation research took place only in Amsterdam where prostitution has for some time been decriminalized: this was done to avoid the methodological complication of engaging in activity illegal in the American context. There, the sociologist was sponsored by a Dutch fellowship and donated whatever small monies she could to an international organization dedicated to the rights and health care of prostitutes. At her Chicago site, the study was conducted equally intensively. Here, though, time was spent hanging out with sex workers, observing and sharing in a majority of activities exclusive of waged labour. The sociologist was already acquainted with the sex industry since, as a college freshman, she had worked part-time as a topless dancer in order to earn money for her education. Following college, she gained direct experience with sex work, working for an escort service among a variety of other jobs taken before beginning graduate school (145).

Chancer poses the question of whether the feminist sociologist would be hired by a respected college or university and whether she would face criticism due to
her participant observation and due to her choice of subject. Consequently, Chancer remarks upon the absence of study on U.S. prostitution, specifically in feminist theory, which she interprets as being neither "accidental nor insignificant" (146). The following passage contains her interpretations, providing a reason for ambivalence toward prostitution:

Prostitution (and its study) treads into unconsciously threatening waters, remaining marginal and comparatively untheorized precisely because something about it is so central and meaningful. To analyze prostitution unavoidably raises both the ongoing specter of gendered oppression in patriarchal societies and our often-schizophrenic--part-acknowledged, part-tabooed--passions about sex: in combination, the two may evoke highly ambivalent and disconcerting sets of reactions (Chancer 146).

Chancer highlights the poles of feminist theory on prostitution--the group of feminists who consider prostitution "morally and politically objectionable" versus those feminists who "favor decriminalization and according greater legitimacy to a socially reconstructed 'sex work'" (155). Unfortunately, Chancer recognizes that this division promotes ambivalence toward prostitution. Another issue in depictions of prostitution is that representations may be unrealistic, undermining feminist debates about prostitution. As a primary example, a female prostitute in the 1990 movie Pretty Woman falls in love with her millionaire customer, who rescues her from her occupation. This fairy tale ending undercuts the poles about prostitution created in feminist thinking, implying that a prostitute may be rescued from her situation by a customer. Additionally, the movie fails to delve into any degrading conditions surrounding prostitution. Such unrealistic representations point to the need to address the representations, realistic and
fictional, which pervade society and which mediate views of prostitution.

Following these examples of current debates about the representations of prostitution and about prostitution itself, I recognize the need to reorient the discussion from a North American setting and concepts about prostitution to include the depiction of prostitutes in a non-Western context. By investigating the depiction of prostitutes in non-Western literature, I can suggest that these depictions are complicated, with the prostitutes possessing a potent symbolic status. I propose that the representations of prostitutes in the novels I read offer a range of complexity; they function as dynamic symbols and as strong narrative voices to explore and evaluate the oppression in postcolonial societies.

Before examining the portraits of prostitution represented in these novels, I feel it is necessary to define the relationship between women and representation. To provide a theoretical framework in which to place my argument, I will rely on recent work done of the representations of fallen women--work informed by current feminist theories and cultural studies. Amanda Anderson discusses Nina Auerbach's view presented in Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth, a view Anderson finds problematic:

Auerbach interprets representations of the fallen woman as both conveying and dispensing a myth of powerful womanhood that centrally inhabited the Victorian cultural imagination. Yet despite her invocation of cultural myths and her historically sensitive treatment of "character," Auerbach often conceives of the relation between women and representation as curiously unmediated, casting femininity as directly empowered or suppressed through representation (Anderson 7-8).

In applying this Victorian concept of agency to modern-day representations of
prostitution, I would contend that the representations in the African novels which I scrutinized do not hold the lack of mediation Auerbach mentions. The representations, instead, empower rather than suppress the women they represent. The novels progress, in various ways, toward the prostitute’s liberation through her role as an agent for social and political change.

Through these complex portrayals of agents for social change, the prostitutes become powerful characters, speaking or, in the fullest sense, acting on their concerns and the concerns of their nations. Firdaus, in Woman at Point Zero, speaks against the oppression of woman under the confines of her religion; her concern is with gender relations forged from the use of Islam as a political tool. In contrast, Petals of Blood offers a main character who is an active proponent of social change in her community, who transforms the lives of those under her influence; Wanja demonstrates that women must assume an active role in the fight for political freedom. The heroine of Jagua Nana and Wanja both become mothers and return to a traditional village existence. Motherhood in these novels seems to hold a feminist significance. In all four situations, the prostitutes move toward and move away from prostitution, showing the continual fluctuation in social structures and applying prostitution as a metaphor for the prostitution of their respective African nations. Thus, this extent of portrayals indicates that the discussion of representations of prostitution is significantly more complex than the discussion Horn and Pringle have presented. At no place in the collection of essays they have compiled do they mention the symbolic force of the prostitute in these African novels.
By investigating the depiction of prostitutes in non-Western literature, I can suggest an alternative to the current representations of prostitutes offered by Pringle and Horn. My alternative is to suggest that the authors of the four novels I read—*Woman at Point Zero*, *Prostitute*, *Jagua Nana*, and *Petals of Blood*—apply prostitution as a metaphor for the prostitution of each African nation. Through the development of the prostitutes, the authors advocate societal change and show that involvement in corruption leads to degradation for all members of society. The prostitutes do possess a symbolic status, but the symbolism lends the prostitute the ability to indicate societal problems on several levels. For example, Ngugi's Wanja symbolizes Kenya, but Wanja gains power from her symbolic status. By deemphasizing Wanja's individuality and making her representative of Kenya and of the African continent as a whole, Ngugi's Wanja indicates societal problems in two ways—through her position as a prostitute and through her position as a woman. Comparably, the remaining authors included in my study demonstrate the “prostitution” of their countries under corrupt political and social influences; through the prostitutes they create, the authors demonstrate the need for change in society, transformations either suggested or enacted by the prostitutes, with Ngugi's Wanja serving as the model of enactment.
Chapter 1: Removing the Veil, Accepting the Shroud

The veil was torn from my eyes. I was opening them for the first time, seeing my life in a new way. I was not a respected woman. It was something I had not known before. . . . I had to become a respectable woman, even if the price were to be my life (El Saadawi 72-3).

This passage, the climax of *Woman at Point Zero*, reveals the main character Firdaus's anxiety about the dishonorable societal position she occupies as a prostitute. The central metaphor of the passage, that of a metaphorical rebirth, an unveiling, opposes the Islamic belief that women should remain veiled; the action of unveiling brings into question Firdaus's notion of respect and the societal construction of respect. For Firdaus, the removal of the figurative veil also summons her literal removal from society's conventions. With a new clarity, she witnesses her disrespect, and she establishes her struggle to develop respectability, to consider herself worthy, even if the price is life itself.

The reader soon realizes that the cost will be Firdaus's life. She has been imprisoned for a customer's murder, a wrong she admits she has committed. A well-known physician visits the prison to interview women for a psychological research project. Firdaus, considered a scornful figure by her jailers, interests the doctor, but Firdaus initially refuses to grant the doctor an interview. Finally, the evening before she is sentenced to death for her crime, Firdaus tells the doctor the tale of her life, a path which led her to prostitution and murder. The story and the woman interest the doctor; both are enveloping and magical. Through the story, Firdaus provokes the doctor, respected by society, to take a
closer look beneath the veil of society and to react to the oppression hidden beneath the surface. By the story’s end, the doctor cannot accept her society’s structure, and she leaves the jail with a clarity she had not previously expressed, with the veil removed from her eyes. In the end, the doctor concludes that it is she, and not Firdaus, who ought to be the recipient of society’s derision.

Firdaus adds complexity to the discussion about representations of prostitutes; she is a character facing the consequences of speaking against the system of gender relations supported by Islam, a system which oppresses her. Her character reacts to the oppression around her, in a symbolic and in a human way. In my reading, Saadawi sustains the development of Firdaus's character so that she attains a symbolic status, representing conflicts in the whole of society through her strained circumstances; thus, Saadawi forms her character. As Firdaus shares her story with the doctor, her voice affects this listener, perhaps even changing the doctor's outlook or definition of life. Thus, evaluated as a woman who alters her listener’s life, possibly impacting the structure of society, Firdaus simply cannot be merely symbolic; her humanity impacts others.

As a prisoner in Quantir Prison, it would seem that Firdaus, the central character of Woman at Point Zero would seek freedom from her imprisoned state and the chance to start her life anew. Yet, Firdaus's realization that she, as a prostitute, is considered disrespectful influences her to choose death as her form of liberation. In her political system, to regain respectability, Firdaus realizes that her only answer is to fight the system that has oppressed her for so long: "All my life I have been searching for something that would fill me with
pride, make me feel superior to everyone else, including kings, princes and rulers. Each time I picked up a newspaper and found a picture of a man who was one of them, I spit on it" (El Saadawi 11). Firdaus murders a male customer and accepts the punishment of death as an adequate, respectable, courageous answer to the charges against her.

The progression from disrespect to respect, pervaded by images of powerlessness and hiding, marks Firdaus in Woman at Point Zero; initially, she is branded by disrespect, society's label for a prostitute. The juxtaposition of the doctor who interviews her, respected for her contribution to society, and Firdaus, caught in contempt for prostitution, shows the opposition of power and powerlessness, respect and disrespect. Firdaus's position as a prostitute highlights the cruel treatment of women in Egypt during this period. In the position of a woman, she remarks that she "has not the courage to lift her hand" (El Saadawi 11) against the forces that oppress her. As a prostitute, Firdaus complicates this role by "hiding her fear beneath layers of makeup" (El Saadawi 11). This makeup symbolizes a figurative and a literal veiling with Firdaus internally containing her fear from society and literally veiling her face in makeup, an act of covering which disguises her expressions and also disguises her low class.

Throughout the novel, there is an emphasis on paradoxical sight, on things exposed and things covered, resulting in tension. Firdaus only remembers her mother's eyes: "All I can remember are two rings of intense white around two circles of intense black" (El Saadawi 17). Firdaus connects
with other characters in the novel, her schoolteacher Miss Iqbal and the factory worker Ibraham, because their eyes are like her mothers; both sets of eyes are “after her, holding onto her, refusing to let go” (El Saadawi 28).

Firdaus holds a connection with her mother, but no connection with her father or with men. Instead, she senses eyes observing her in the darkness, most likely male eyes which “dropped their gaze with slow intent down to my shoes, rested there for a moment, then gradually started to climb up my legs, to my thighs, my belly, my breasts, my neck, and finally came to a stop, fastening themselves steadily in my eyes, with the same cold intent” (El Saadawi 42). Those eyes, representative of the patriarchal system, blur Firdaus’s identity.

Firdaus, in retelling the encounters with connecting or accusing eyes, comments, “I could no longer distinguish between the faces of my father and my mother, my uncle and Mohammadain, Iqbal and Wafeya” (El Saadawi 31). This situation could indicate her removal from class boundaries; she is unable to separate images which construct her identity and which would place her in the class of her birth.

Another example illustrates my theory. After accepting money for prostitution, Firdaus visits a restaurant and orders food with the piastre she has earned, yet she discerns no one watching to gauge the amount of food she eats: “Ever since I was born those two eyes had been there...following every morsel of food on my plate” (El Saadawi 66). On the verge of asking the waiter to decide who was worthy of handling money, Firdaus hides her thoughts: “But I pressed my lips even more tightly together and held back the words” (El Saadawi 67).
Withholding herself from connections with class boundaries, Firdaus remains a woman with a blurred identity.

Accordingly, the role of the prostitute and the role of a woman limit Firdaus, removing her possibilities for expression and action and blurring her identity; the situation in the novel reflects some situations in Egypt's history, especially those which deal with women's rights in Islam. Maxine Molyneux cites a pertinent example of attitudes toward the struggle for women's rights in *Women, Islam and the State*. In 1952, a conference of Egyptian religious scholars was held in opposition to feminism, the objective of which, the scholars believed, was the destruction of Islamic society; they commented that "colonialism has encouraged women to go out in order to destroy Islamic society" (Kandiyoti 214). According to El Saadawi, women's oppression does not originate from Islam itself but stems from its use as a political tool: "Islam is not the enemy of women, but it has been and is being used by patriarchal systems so that its most repressive and reactionary aspects are emphasized" (*Race and Class* 176).

The treatment of Firdaus by men in the novel highlights Saadawi's attitude that religion may be used in a repressive sense to influence the actions of women. Firdaus appears to view relationships between men and women as a reflection of the religious repression:

I knew that my profession had been invented by men, and that men were in control of both of our worlds, the one on earth, and the one in heaven. That men force women to sell their bodies at a price, and that the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another.
Because I was intelligent, I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife (El Saadawi 91).

Firdaus’s opinion most likely results from her uncle forcing her into an arranged marriage to Sheikh Mahmoud, a man who beats her. She visits her uncle’s home, protesting the abuse, and her aunt and uncle inform her that such a beating is justified by their religion: “The precepts of religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience” (El Saadawi 44). Firdaus returns to her husband, accepting his beatings until she can bear them no more. She leaves him, and shortly enters another system in which men exploit women— that of prostitution. Ironically, through choosing this occupation, she is choosing what little freedom of action that is available to her: “How many were the years of my life that went by before my body and myself really became mine?” (El Saadawi 68).

Cornered by the patriarchal system, Firdaus experiences an absence of connection with men. While a child, she watches men “walking through the narrow winding lanes, nodding their heads in admiration, and in approval of everything his Holiness the Imam had said” (El Saadawi 13). Within the crowd of men, she cannot distinguish her father: “He resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell” (El Saadawi 13). In her marriage, she wipes away any trace of her husband’s body: “I would gently slip my body out from under him, and go on tiptoe to the bathroom. There I would carefully wash my face and lips, my arms and thighs, and every part of my body, taking care not to miss a single
inch, going over it several times with soap and water (El Saadawi 44). To Firdaus men are proponents of betrayal. Bayoumi, who takes her in after her husband beats her, forces her into prostitution. Di’aa, a customer when Firdaus has fled Bayoumi, points out her disreputable position, informing her that even “a doctor, in carrying out his duties, feels he is worthy of respect” (El Saadawi 70). Most importantly, Ibriham, a fellow employee when Firdaus seeks a respectable occupation in business, admits his love for her, makes love to her, and abandons her. This situation diminishes Firdaus’s sense of worth in love:

With love, I had begun to imagine that I had become a human being...I wanted nothing, except perhaps one thing, to be saved through love from it all. To find myself again, to recover the self I had lost. To become a human being who was not looked upon with scorn, or despised, but respected (El Saadawi 86).

Returning to prostitution, Firdaus finds that the freedom of prostitution has its limitations. Firdaus removes herself from the betrayals of men, veiling her true feelings and hiding her self:

When I was a prostitute I protected my self, fought back at every moment, was never off guard. To protect my deep inner soul from men, I offered them only an outer shell. I kept my heart and soul, and let my body play its role, its passive, inert, unfeeling role. I learnt to resist by being passive, to keep myself whole by offering nothing, to live by withdrawing to a world of my own....I was telling the man that he could have my body, he could have a dead body, but he would never be able to make me react, or tremble, or feel either pleasure or pain (El Saadawi 86).

In recognition of her own emotional removal, Firdaus finally breaks with the limitations of her profession; she removes the final veil from her eyes, and acts
on her rage, tearing a customer’s money to shreds:

The movement of my hands as I tore the money to pieces, tore off the veil, the last remaining veil before my eyes, to reveal the whole enigma which had puzzled me throughout, the true enigma of my life. . . . It was as though I was destroying all the money I had ever held, my father’s piastre, my uncle’s piastre... and at the same time destroying all the men I had ever known

(El Saadawi 98).

Georges Tarabishi hints that Firdaus intends to challenge social laws:

She sees it [the man and woman relationship] as the most hostile and belligerent relationship of all. Men and women are two tribes, two classes, two nations separated by a yawning chasm of unabating strife. Any contact between them is only to create destruction, not life. Thus Firdaus is a fighter, and her battlefield is the two sexes. Her slogan is that, far from complementing the other, the sexes actually repel each other... It is a war without truce and without exception. Every man is the enemy, whether he be father, brother, uncle, husband, judge, policeman, doctor, journalist or whatever (17).

El Saadawi, in presenting a prostitute who seeks emancipation from the strictures of society, raises issues surrounding the positions of women in contemporary Egyptian society; she modifies the system of cultural attitudes composed by Islam by constructing the definition of the “creative woman.” Women, such as Firdaus, who choose freedom rather than oppression, are admired by El Saadawi, who emphasizes their strength. She resolves that women’s roles are the consequence of oppression:

The situation and problems of women in our contemporary societies are born of developments in history that made one class rule over another, and men dominate over women. The creative woman cannot expect praise or acceptance. This fact alleviates the impact of the attacks to which she
might be exposed. Moreover, the expectation of the infliction of harm makes her get ready, and this readiness equips her to confront her enemies, helping her to win or to at least sustain as little loss as possible. Even though victory is a pleasant experience for any human being, defeat can also be a useful experience. This transformation of defeat into experience requires that the woman should have no regrets and that she should press ahead readily with courage, confidence, and freedom ("Creative Women" 92).

Functioning as a political tool, Islam, in Saadawi’s opinion, may be utilized for men to obtain power over women. Firdaus corresponds with Saadawi’s definition of a “creative” woman, one who cannot expect praise or acceptance from the system which suppresses her; thus Firdaus selects the disrespectful position of prostitution as her means of challenging those who oppress her:

“Revolution for them is like sex for us. Something to be abused. Something to be sold” (El Saadawi 88). Firdaus prepares herself for harm as she removes the final veil, removing herself once and for all from the patriarchal system:

I returned to the money in my hand and with a redoubled fury tore the remaining bank notes into shreds...I was destroying all the men I’d ever known, one after the other in a row...ridding myself of them for once and for all, removing every trace their piastres had left on my fingers, tearing away the very flesh of my fingers so that nothing remained but bone, ensuring that not a single vestige of these men would remain at all (El Saadawi 98).

In Firdaus’s attitude, one witnesses the personification of Saadawi’s creative woman, one ready to confront her enemies and to shift defeat into experience. Firdaus’s move from defeat to experience and opposition to the oppression of women motivates her choice to commit murder. She tells the man she murders that “no woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man” (El
Saadawi 100). Like Firdaus's creative woman, her crime has no repercussions, no regrets: "For what you call my crime was no crime" (El Saadawi 101). Therefore, Firdaus's character presents the characteristics Saadawi defines; her character promotes the freedom of Egyptian women from repression.

El Saadawi herself was an active feminist, promoting the implementation of Arab socialism (Kandiyoti 215). Working as a medical doctor, she directly encountered the physical and psychological effects on female patients of the use of female circumcision and the obsession with female virginity. Margot Badran regards the way this experience fueled her promotion of feminism:

The connections she made between patriarchy, class, and religion led her to publish *Al Mar'a a wa al jins (The Woman and Sex)* in 1971, the first year of the Sadat regime. With Al Saadawi feminist discourse took a new turn; she introduced the issue of the sexual oppression of women connected with everyday customs as well as the prevalence of deviant behaviors such as incest that victimized women inside the family. The feminist physician broke a cultural taboo by exposing the sexual oppression of women. The following year she lost her job. Silenced in Egypt, with her books and writings blacklisted and censored by the state, she went into self-imposed exile (220-221).

The reader sees another self-imposed exile, resulting from acting against class and political barriers, in Firdaus. She leaves prostitution to work in a company, but returns to prostitution after considering its monetary value: "After I had spent three years in the company, I realized that as a prostitute I had been looked on with more respect, and been valued more highly than all the female employees" (El Saadawi 75). Later, recognizing a loss of respectability from society in returning to prostitution, she reverses this decision, choosing instead
to accept the exile of jail rather than to remain veiled by disrespect.

The act of Firdaus removing her veil is significant as it is considered in light of Islam. Literally, it means a denial of the role of a woman obedient to the rules of her religion, sex, and class, a denial of a societal structure and gender relations which support the subordination of women. She thinks: "All women are victims of deception. Men impose deceptions on women and punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling so low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service for life, or insults, or blows" (El Saadawi 86). The removal of the veil necessitates an act against the system which deceives, a murder which destroys the system imposed on her, and destruction that the men in power must stop:

They know that as long as I live, that they shall not be safe, that I shall kill them. My life means their death. My death means their life. . .And life for them means more crime, more plunder, unlimited booty. I have triumphed over both death and life because I no longer desire to live, nor do I any longer fear to die...For during life it is our wants, our fears, our hopes that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger. They would like to discover there is after all something which I desire, or fear, or hope for, then they know they can enslave me much more (El Saadawi 101).

Firdaus’s attitude mirrors El Saadawi’s attitude about her imprisonment for her occupation and writing. Saadawi recalls her imprisonment victoriously: "They were moments of triumph, of victory over the overwhelming and arbitrary might of the unjust, oppressive ruling authority that had put me behind those steel bars solely because I write" (El Saadawi Memoirs 199). She continues with the
reason the ruling authority was threatened by her: “The knowledge of the way things really are: this is the true danger that threatens the ruling powers in any country in the world, past or present” (El Saadawi Memoirs 201). Like Saadawi, Firdaus threatens those in power because she possesses knowledge of oppression in her society. Furthermore, she has rejected the society’s oppression of women in favor of pursuing her freedom.

Firdaus’ death then is her liberation; she accepts a veil of her own making, the shroud of death, to fight the systems of class, gender, and religion which bind her in disrespect. She relishes death’s arrival: “This journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth fills me with pride” (El Saadawi 11). The journey to an unknown location liberates Firdaus from fear and gives her the power of truth: “For the truth is always easy and simple. And in its simplicity lies a savage power....And to have arrived at the truth means one never fears death” (El Saadawi 102). Firdaus dies opposing Egypt’s system of subordination, wearing a shroud rather than the veil of societal oppression.

Essential to this liberation is the relation of Firdaus’s story to the doctor. As I stated earlier, this story affects the listener, causing her to question the structure of her society and to recognize the importance and courage of a woman labeled disrespectable. When Firdaus rejects her request for an interview, the physician assumes Firdaus’s disrespect: “Compared to her I was nothing but a small insect crawling upon the land amidst millions of other insects” (El Saadawi 3). Considering her situation the following day after receiving an additional rejection for the interview, the doctor justifies her superiority to Firdaus
and appropriates a superior stance: “A doctor was surely to be preferred to someone who had committed murder” (El Saadawi 5). This stance vanishes the moment Firdaus’s “eyes that killed” (El Saadawi 6) meet hers. After Firdaus is led to her execution, the doctor reacts to her shame as she returns home to complete her research:

I could see the lies, could follow hypocrisy bustling around. I rammed my foot down on the accelerator as though in a hurry to run over the world, to stamp it all out. But the next moment I quickly lifted my foot and braked hard, and the car came to a halt. And at that moment I realized that Firdaus had more courage than I (El Saadawi 108).

This action, in my mind, idealises what El Saadawi terms in her definition of creative women as the transformation from defeat into experience. Firdaus utilizes the defeat of her imprisonment to resist the suppression of women, particularly of prostitutes, at the hands of the men in power. Firdaus’s defeat, as Saadawi remarks about creative women, becomes her victory as other women, such as the doctor, will acknowledge her struggle and her fearlessness and will acknowledge that she was indeed worthy of society’s respect. Firdaus’s situation is similar to El Saadawi’s own imprisonment: “I could have become one of those slaves to the ruling institution...Or I could continue on the difficult path, the one that had led me to prison” (El Saadawi Memoirs 202).

Firdaus chooses death, probably the most difficult path of all. Voicing her struggle against the oppression of women by men, forcing the doctor into recognition of duplicity, Firdaus, disreputable though she may be, wins. This depiction is intricate, encouraging the possibility that Firdaus discovers her worth
through the removal of the Islamic veil which threatens her and the acceptance of the shroud of death which liberates her. In the act of sharing her story to create change, Firdaus redeems herself.
Chapter 2: Messenger of Reform: "They did not choose to be the unwanted."

Darkness of painful emptiness, on my right. It hates the neon rays for restraining its desire to batter and consume my soul. The bedbugs are there, I know, nosing around hurriedly, relentlessly, embracing here and there or rubbing noses in collision while in search of blood to suck, as if it is their meal by right. And why not? Who owns me, who expects me around, who misses me, who glows at my presence except them? (Oculi 23).

The solitary figure of Rosa, the prostitute relating her story in Okello Oculi's *Prostitute*, resides in the debasement of urban Uganda. Filled with images of colonial oppression, her story reveals her dashed hopes and dreams for her future and the harsh realities that city life has forced her to face. This stream-of-consciousness narrative consists of Rosa’s thoughts on her occupation and her life, circumstances connected by misery. She exists as an alienated woman, in a world of darkness, while bedbugs, perhaps even representing the customers who “feed” from her body, scurry over her to accumulate what they can. According to Rosa, the bedbugs, or those who use her, are the only creatures who would notice her disappearance. Cornered in degradation, Rosa struggles for human eyes to notice her worth.

In his prologue to *Prostitute*, Oculi introduces Rosa’s struggle by telling the parable of mother rabbits dreaming of being pursued by dogs and singing of this threat to their babies:

*Okonke nkusereke katerebembe*
*Oyonke nkusereke kanyamuswaga,*
*Nyute omu kasamba katerebembe*
Kihungu kikutwale kanyamuswaga
Nkute ha muhanda katerebembe
Abagenzi bakutwale kanyamuswaga

Suckle and let me hide you, little tender one
Suckle and let me hide you, little greedy one
Shall I hide you in a small bush, little tender one
The bird of prey will take you, little greedy one.
Shall I hide you by the wayside, little tender one
The passerby will take you, little greedy one (Oculi 7).

He writes that the "children of those imaginings, their sorrowing concern with the
desecration of life to come, in that bush which is the earth, is a passionate cry for
Life" (Oculi 7). It seems here that Oculi's remarks about concern with
desecration reinforce the graveness and desecration of Rosa's situation while
the novel opens with a third-person account of Rosa crouched in a doorway.
The remainder of the chapter traces Rosa's entrance into prostitution. Banished
from her village for submitting to the attentions of a village chief, she moves to
the city and becomes immersed in the misery of city life. Rosa's story contains
her perspectives on the desecration in her life, varying in perspective--ranging
from first person narrative to third person narrative, from prose to poetry. This
third-person account distances the reader from Rosa's situation, but the chapters
which contain her perspective plunge the reader in Rosa's thoughts. The result
is a fragmented account of Rosa's concern with her desecration; the account is,
as Oculi suggests, a passionate cry for life.

Like Firdaus in Woman at Point Zero, Rosa unveils societal oppression
and degradation through her words. She appears to choose death at the novel's
end, but the result of her story is a call for societal change, a cry for life. Rosa's
doubt and isolation define her as a character while she proceeds in telling her story, exposing her perspectives on rural and urban life under the influences of colonialism. Oculi’s prostitute is despairing, yet heroic. Rosa’s purpose is to promote societal transformations, not by her actions, but through the structure and content of her story, through exposing her thoughts to the reader. She acts as a messenger of reform, disclosing the fragmented chaos of urban life. However, as a messenger qualified by people and by the horror of her circumstances, Rosa is qualified to inaction. Her only hope is that people will hear and react to her story.

Interweaving the genres of poetry and prose, Oculi develops Rosa as woman caught between extremes--love for her past rural life and hatred of urban chaos in present-day Uganda. As a woman grappling with the human problems of doubt and isolation and a woman embarking on a search for truth, Rosa’s portrayal is human, and her degradation is symbolic of the idea that society is prostituting its members. Thus, Rosa is a character with human and symbolic aspects and a direct challenge to Pringle and Horn’s archetypical structure.

The majority of Rosa’s message is transmitted to the reader through snatches of her thoughts and stories; this situation affects the way her message is transmitted to the reader. Stylistically, Oculi’s novel is fragmented; he mixes perspective and form. David Cook discussed the “unevenness of style” with the author in a radio broadcast. Oculi reacted to his suggestion that his sentences were “convoluted, clumsy or hard to follow”:

I was trying to write a novel as I imagined, supposing one
of those old observers in the countryside, those bald-headed
grey-haired old men had written, what sort of novel would he
like? This was definitely my concern in trying to invent a
form of style which was— you know-- very African (Cook 177).

Oculi further responds that the wording reveals the confusion of characters in
real life: "There are moments when people's heads get blocked, people think in
stop-gaps: and there are other moments when people are very lucid" (Cook 178).
Cook also comments that the poetry in the book is "difficult and attempts to
elucidate it do not seem particularly rewarding" (179). Unlike Cook, I have no
objections to the book's style or form after reading it. To me, the rapid switches
in style and form transmit the representation of the chaotic city life of the
prostitute.

Additional criticism has suggested the author's portrait of Rosa uncovers
the evils of colonialism and urban life. In “Legitimate Protest: On Okello Oculi's
Prostitute,” David Cook observes that Oculi is "preoccupied with an awareness
that facing the unsavory facts of our environment is a prerequisite of any serious
consideration of reform" (168). Oculi himself admits this purpose exists in his
novels:

In town what I call the problem of unnoticing can start to
creep into people's consciousness till eventually what
they don't like begins to form a sediment. . . . I think if one
is very concerned about change in society, about reform,
about positive policies being adopted in order to help people,
one cannot afford to stop getting shocked by what one
sees (Cook 168).

David Cook also mentions that Rosa is similar to Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua
Nana: "She has her heroic qualities, reflected in the way she makes the best of
the life she is flung into; and we are led to perceive that she discovers islands of
sensual exhilaration, even exaltation in this sea of filth" (Cook 170). However, I
disagree with Cook's statement. If Rosa is discovering the exaltation in her life
he claims she is, why is she not acting against the circumstances of her life?
Khalid Kishtainy, author of *The Prostitute in Progressive Literature*, agrees that
Okello describes the shocking and the unsavory--the "squalor engulfing the
African harlot, the brown stagnant water, the urine, pus and vomit," (79).
However, Kishtainy sees Oculi making a "limited attempt to deal with the problem
of the harlot and the social background of her life, though when he goes on to
portray her thoughts and feelings they seem to be more like his own about a
variety of subjects, not necessarily related to the story of prostitution" (79).

Nevertheless, I view the novel as a serious attempt to create societal
reform while Oculi explicates Rosa's despair and isolation in her urban world;
whether the feelings and thoughts shown are Rosa's or Oculi's, they *do* relate to
prostitution. Portraying the contrast between Rosa's past idyll and present
misery, between town and city, Oculi demonstrates the collision of traditional and
new worlds. Rosa labels herself "a sign of development, one of the three stars in
the sky signalling the way to the urbanisation messiah" (82), yet no "messiah"
appears to rescue Rosa or any other character from the degradation of this city.
Ironically, Rosa may signal the path for development, but the path to rescue in
this instance is nonexistent. As a messenger of urban reform, no one but the
bedbugs care that she exists.

Obviously, this is no fairy-tale world with the possibility of rescue, yet Rosa
somehow persists in gaining something from it, cruel as the gain may be.

Sharing her story, she reaches a realization of life and the harsh lessons it holds for her as well as for other prostitutes. By engaging in explaining the harsh lessons, Rosa understands her mortality, accepting it as the final dire circumstance in her life. She does not depart from prostitution; she identifies its horrors but for her no escape but death is available. Oculi abandons her, hunched in the doorway of a slum with no possibility of rescue, in the same degrading position with which he initiates the novel, trapped by her inability to act against her situation.

This lack of rescue is the first lesson in the city--"out here" (Oculi 91) as Rosa describes it. She states the lesson simply: "We are born alone and we die alone" (Oculi 91). Living in such isolation, Rosa has no possibilities for rescue, for being saved by another human. Bisi, the man she thought could remove her from her fate, has been killed by powerful men: "He was the only one I had, only him alone; the one single dust of love that came in through the rainstorm, when it was cold all around, and walked into my life" (Oculi 67). Fear affects her in the city: "I am different now, very different. My self-confidence is no longer there" (Oculi 26).

In place of self-confidence, Rosa exhibits rage and sorrow. She loathes her customers and their esteemed position in society:

> You mistake my caress for passion's streams nosing for passageways in the ridges of your mass. You are mistaken...The waves are swirling and writhing pulsating madness, wanting and raving beneath my surface to bash at your ridges...When you add a citation of your
qualifications and your damned status my nails too begin to
tremble from the vibrations within, because when you admit
and confirm in my face that you do not deserve me when
if I could, I stand firm to dare those walls of darkness alone
on the road, a volcano flames inside. Your qualification
qualifies me into the edges of those pits that flow day and night
with fermented and stale urines and washings off clothes, slum
clothes (Oculi 28).

In her customers' eyes, Rosa is nothing but an object for them to use and
abandon, a possible reflection of the treatment of natives by those who colonized
or a reflection of the way the elite in the city dismiss the problems of the poor.
David Cook suggests that the images of *Prostitute* support the notion that
prostitution pervades the society: "We sense that the whole process of
prostitution is echoed in many aspects of life. Society prostitutes itself. In his
radio discussion [with David Cook] the author has indeed encouraged us to go
further and relate the life of the prostitute after whom the book is named to the
recent history of the African continent" (Cook 176).

To build on this analogy, Rosa selects products of colonialism such as
cars and roads and uses them metaphorically to portray the dismissal of the
slums: "These days people are anxious, very anxious to level out the pimples; to
drive the gravel down and out of the way. People are anxious for smooth
surfaces" (Oculi 44). This situation is similar to the neo-colonial concentration on
monetary gain and on appearances in *Petals of Blood*. This concentration on
appearance incites in Rosa "a yearning inside for revenge; for a chance to assert
oneself" (44). Yet Rosa finds herself unable to act upon her outrage, feeling it
would occur unnoticed:
But what does it matter? I am already a thesis, researched by the bugs, and they have done a scholarly job, judging from the looks in those eyes I pass by. I have a status too. I arouse nods easily. Let Madam Nobottom have her degrees. It is probably all she has to brave this cruel world with. A woman in search of truth! What doesn’t she know! She sees it in the mirror every day, except that she doesn’t want to believe what she sees (Oculi 91).

Rosa obviously is enraged over her reduced circumstances, acknowledging the truth she beholds in the mirror—that she is restrained by her lack of status and her lack of degrees. However, when others qualify her low status with the looks in their eyes, Rosa angrily accepts this low status as her due and fails to act against this qualification, insisting that her status cannot get any lower; she is only a thesis available for their study, an object of their derision.

Throughout the novel, Oculi insinuates that colonialism caused Rosa’s situation and her inability to act. When the reader first meets her, her position reinforces her lack of status:

She sat crouched, cross-legged, bisecting the doorway, buffer between the dark shelter to her right, and the sunset darkness to her left...Around her was the stubborn stench of undrained urine. Some of the urine was hers, especially on the nights when business had been good. Some was of the other women and their children (Oculi 9).

Bathed in darkness and surrounded by odor, Rosa manifests a low position in society. Oculi recounts her encounters with white customers, enacting the negative impact of colonialism:

These people are strange, her parents had always said. These men had sold people for money and they kill people by bursting them up with big fires that explode... Ah! If she
went with one she may never see the sun the next day. . . . But a friend of hers had insisted once, pulled her and pushed her into a car from behind and they had travelled together with two of these men who wanted them. From then on she had become used. Today all those beers she had drunk from them are like the wreaths to her pride’s graveyard, her pride which existed once (Okello 11).

Kishtainy supports that white men are to blame for Rosa’s predicament: “Thus the black woman is seduced or raped by the white colonialist in the back of his car and the way is opened for her towards the jukebox whorehouses” (80). Cook, however, imputes both the white men and society for Rosa’s position; she is victimized "not only at the hands of the big man in his shiny black car and his set, but in the first instance she is deliberately offered by the kowtowing village community which, in its sycophancy, abandons the young girl to a situation which is predictably beyond her control" (Cook 169).

Similarly, the colonial influences in Uganda abandoned the native to situations beyond their control. According to The Prostitute in Progressive Literature, the traditional construction of family cohesion was "undermined by the intrusion of Western colonialism with its utter disregard of family requirements" (Kishtainy 74). Kishtainy mentions a British Royal Commission Report remarking the "family-community was threatened with complete dissolution" by 30 to 60 percent of healthy men in Central Africa being hired as laborers. This example stresses the threat colonialism placed on the Ugandan people. Ali A. Mazrui addresses the question of colonialism in his article “Is Africa decaying? The view from Uganda.” He explains the divisions existent in Africa because of
colonialism:

The African state since independence has been subject to two competing pressures: the push toward militarization and the pull towards privatization...The pull towards privatization is partly a legacy of greed in the Shylock tradition. The push toward militarization, on the other hand, is a legacy of naked power in the condition of Shaka. Africa, in other words, is caught up between greed and naked power, and the decay of the post-colonial state is the consequence of that dialectic (*Uganda Now* 345).

Through Rosa, Okello suggests the decay of Uganda and of the African continent and voices his loathing for colonialism and white domination. Rosa's banishment by her family follows her acceptance of a corrupt government official's attentions. Subsequently, she travels to the city and, like the remainder of society, departs from tradition to pursue money--money which she, with no education or training, gains through prostitution. Rosa believes the intrusion degrades the members of society themselves:

People leave their lands where the bones of their grandmothers are to run to strange lands to find money. White people have hated us and lied to us about their hatred of us just to get money out of our lands and hands. What is in this money, people! For us we go here, open our thighs, like dogs urinating on road corners and posts and stumps to mark guides for their noses on strange roads, and all that for money (*Oculi* 79).

But Rosa clearly places some blame on Ugandans for allowing the occurrence of colonial intrusion. The breakdown of cars and tarmac, "the road that eats at them" (43), indicates the political struggle in Uganda: "They are so strange. They are so treacherous. . . . We make them. It is we who put them on the road" (39). In Rosa, the intrusion invokes a desire for revenge and an opportunity to
assert herself (44).

Thus, Rosa learns her next urban lesson—loss and fear. She admits prostitution creates fear between her and her peers: "We fight... each is afraid of being the exterminated, the knocked out" (99). Yet their rivalry is not so strong that the prostitutes do not share a comraderie in their occupation, a strange familial cohesion. With inclusion in this family unit, Rosa considers those left in her home village, especially her childhood companion Rebecca, knowing that change has come since Rosa's departure: "I hear all those people at home are now married, all the boys and girls I grew up with" (102). Here, Rosa seems to consider her past life wistfully, wishing for a return to a tradition which would remove her from the strict realities of the city.

Through her recollections of village life, Rosa voices her desire for reform, for an existence other than the degradation she has. She recreate gender relations in her village, focusing on the family, children, and marriage, which she once desired: "It was sweet to imagine ourselves busy with our children one day; busy being mothers of homes, the way our mothers were. It was sweet to think of having children and of knowing that people knew that you were fertile" (125). She notes the difference between those idyllic plans and her present life:

But those rats we have here for children are not children. People at home say that weeds are weeds and grow and live to die, still the same weeds they were when they first came. They also used to say that one should never laugh at weeds because they did not choose to be the unwanted (Oculi 125).

In this world, rats take the place of children. Unlike Wanja, Rosa's attitude
toward children is cynical; she wishes to expose children to the harsh realities of city life at an early age. Without children of her own, Rosa acts as a surrogate mother to Pokopoko, a half-caste child, most likely an unwanted one, and a representative of the prostitutes's sordid conditions:

Yellow half-caste,
Dare the gravel stones
Face the dews, tears of grasses, and the thorns on the path
And come to know
That you are the hatch of the careless layings in the slum
Strange waking product
Cruel new oil
Smeared to underline the appointment of your mother,
Me, and them all
To a cursed new order! (129).

Rosa, perhaps voicing Oculi's thoughts, never blames prostitution for chaos; instead, Rosa's poetry blames the colonizing white men and proclaims the prostitutes's innocence:

It happened to you and me differently
We traveled different paths
To arrive here in the slum, for staying:
You at home
Indigenous
Me naturalised.
You see,
The men of your father's breed
Of the skin color of your unknown father
Had castrated your mother's brother once
For their fun on a feast day.

You are born here
Branded daughter of a prostitute by your colour
To live to die a stranger to all, alone.

I know it is not your fault
You are not to blame.
It is them, those people of your father;
But what is the use of it all to you now! (129-130)

Through this passage, Rosa voices her own inaction, projecting it upon the child to whom she speaks: "But what is the use of it all to you now!"

Ending her tirade, Rosa shares her final message of inaction in the city with Pokopoko—stoicism. She advises her matter-of-factly: "Wake to face it all with a straight spine. And if death comes die it. What does it matter now!" (Oculi 132) Rosa accepts her mortality as a matter of indifference, urging the half-caste child to ignore it: "Perform on the trails of my deadness only one ritual. . . . DO NOT NOTICE IT. Let it not bother you. Let it be as it so came to be in the end" (Oculi 132). Rosa's thwarted hopes and desires affect society little, if at all, and, in the end, the novel circles to the beginning with Rosa in another degrading position.

The subordination and inability to act on her feelings which Rosa faces in the novel represents the situation of Ugandan women before the 1960's. Rose Wylie explains the role of women in Ugandan society:

Women's roles were clearly subordinate to those of men, despite the substantial economic and social responsibilities of women in Uganda's many traditional societies. Women were taught to accede to the wishes of their fathers, brothers, and husbands, and, sometimes other men as well, and to demonstrate their subordination to men in most areas of public life (81).

During the 1960's, women sought political power, and the Ugandan Council of Women resolved to publicly record laws regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance and worked for legal reforms to allow women to own property and to
have custody of their children after a divorce (Wylie 82). Rosa's circumstances illustrates the oppression which existed before this point in women's lifes. Even with strength, Rosa believes that women will not survive city life. She mentions the example of a fellow prostitute, who dies at the hands of the powerful:

She used to think that she was very strong. We women are never strong. Those people who told her the truth of things showed it to her in a very final way. When the police had found her body, people say her tongue had been cut out and stuck in between her thighs. People can be very cruel (Oculi 66).

Here, the reader witnesses an example of the horrific silencing of women occurring in society. Rosa suggests that women are not strong enough to defeat the oppression against them.

Oculi's novel, first published in 1968, appears to me to issue a call for reform to the position of prostitutes and women in Uganda, a subordination he most likely wishes changed as demonstrated by the shock value and blunt messages of the book. Although Rosa does not react to her feelings of rage, the revelation of her inaction and her qualification by people of status and by the cruel circumstances of her situation promotes societal and political change. Rosa is the messenger, proclaiming through the story of her life, the need for reform.
Chapter 3: Seeking Prestige, Finding Corruption, Returning to Tradition

They called her Jagua because of her good looks and stunning fashions. They said she was Jag-wa, after the famous British prestige car (Ekwensi 5).

Known for her beauty and her striking sense of fashion, Jagua, the heroine of Cyprian Ekwensi’s Jagua Nana, enjoys her occupation, but threatened by the onset of age wants a husband to remove her from it. In The Prostitute in Progressive Literature, Khalid Kishtainy contends that Jagua has “the same reckless nature and dissatisfied and restless soul as her counterpart in Emilie Zola’s novel Nana” (82). Ekwensi denies that his character Jagua bears any connection to Zola’s Nana. He had never heard of Zola’s novel before Jagua’s publication, and he explicates the selection of his character’s name, chosen for its political undertones:

After Jagua was published I was surprised to hear of Zola’s Nana. I have still not been able to read it, and in fact have not tried. Jagua in the 1950’s in West Africa meant everything that was worth aspiring to. The word came from a corruption of the British car Jaguar—which at that time signified success, especially among the “Been-to’s,” those who had had a British education. Nana is simply a name more commonly found in the Gold Coast [Ghana] than in Nigeria though not exclusive to Ghana. Since I did not read Zola, I could not have intended Jagua Nana as an African Nana (Kishtainy 82).

Ekwensi’s explanation indicates the the way Jagua’s name embodies the Nigerian desire for prestige, the desire for what is British, and the resulting conflict when a character lives under the influences of neo-colonialism, which
emphasizes material and monetary gain. Like Ngugi’s Wanja, Jagua initially is motivated by the desire for monetary gain, but she eventually realizes that her engagement prostitution places her under the influence of corrupt political powers. Additionally, Jagua assumes a political stance in the novel, working to promote peace between two feuding villages and supporting the candidacy of her lover. However, since both of these situations promote her own interests and those of political corruption, Jagua must make a choice similar to Wanja’s; she must resist prostitution and return to a traditional village life, a return which removes her from the questionable influences of neo-colonialism.

Jagua Nana begins with Cyprian Ekwensi’s prostitute preparing herself for the arrival of her youthful lover Freddie Namme. At once she is shown as greedy, vain, but pleased with her occupation; she loves compliments and attention, especially that of men. Like the car after which she is named, she wishes to embody prestige. Prostitution is a role through which Jagua may embody prestige while she flaunts her clothing and her body. Jagua's progression in the novel moves her finally to abandon her frantic vanity and to replace it with a religious serenity, a peaceful outlook, and an acceptance of her age and her eventual mortality. By the novel’s end, Jagua has returned to her home village and to traditional ways. This return to traditional ways and abandonment of her once-beloved profession, I argue, situates Jagua in a complicated symbolic position; to remain untouched by the political and societal corruption which degrades the citizens of Lagos, Jagua must flee the city.

Unlike the depictions of Firdaus and Rosa examined before her, it has
been suggested by critics that Jagua adheres more closely to the archetypes of prostitutes: Khalid Kishtainy calls her "the archetypal prostitute, vain but good natured and tender" (Khalid Kishtainy 82). Yet despite her vanity and greed, Jagua overcomes adversity and assumes a heroic and a political status by the novel's end. Therefore, I cannot agree with the proposal that Rosa adheres to archetypical patterns; instead, she is symbolic of her country's desire for what is British and she is human with a mixture of good and bad qualities including vanity, greed, humor, and happiness.

However, before Jagua's transformation, she relishes her occupation; her interest lies in appearances. Residing in the Nigerian city of Lagos, she is an active, well-known figure, admired for her beauty and style. The novel's action focuses on Jagua's realization that she is losing her youth and her looks; she must find a husband or lover, preferably a rich one, to nurture her in her old age. Jagua chooses Freddie Namme, a man half her age in his twenties, as the perfect candidate for her husband, planning to earn money through prostitution to send him to an English law school to receive an education and to return to marry her. She only will accept a wealthy, educated, young man as a worthy match for her style. What Jagua fails to realize is that Nancy Oll, the youthful daughter of her rival prostitute Mama Nancy, also intends to receive Freddie's affection.

Ekwensi closely correlates Jagua's occupation with political corruption and the scramble for monetary gain. Jagua spends most evenings at the Tropicana Club, a nightclub, a "modern super sex-market," (Ekwensi 13) and a haven for
prostitutes. Men and women of all nationalities gather, hoping to profit from the nightly dances:

White men and black men, they all rose, and crowded the floor. The black men choose the fat women with big hips; the white men clung to the slim girls with plenty of collar bone and little or no waists. There were girls here, and women, to suit all men's tastes. Pure ebony, half-caste, Asiatic, even white. Each girl had the national characteristic that appealed to some male, and each man saw in his type of woman a quality which inspired his gallantry. So the women enticed their victims and the Tropicana profited (Ekwensi 14).

Ekwensi’s situation parallels Ngugi’s description of the way Wanja enticed customers in the bars, a situation in which money always claims the prostitute’s attention. The problems in Jagua and Freddie’s relationship originate at one of these dances when she flirts with a Syrian with enough money to purchase her a dress which Freddie, with his small teacher’s salary, could never afford. Freddie leaves angrily, Jagua pities Freddie’s attitude, but remains with the Syrian since "money always claimed the first loyalty" (Ekwensi 15).

Jagua’s interest in money leads to her degradation, and Freddie fears that she will lure him into this desecration. Enroute home after Jagua remains with the Syrian, Freddie encounters Nancy and realizes that she is no longer the young girl he thought she was; she is a desireable woman. Jealous of Jagua’s acceptance of the Syrian’s attentions, he kisses Nancy and "feels fortified to face Jagua’s possessive love for him" (Ekwensi 21). Returning home to discover Jagua is imprisoned for fighting, he feels a new distaste for her. Viewing her behind bars in degradation, he thinks that she will drag him down with her: "This
was his mistress, and this squalor all came along with the kind of life she had chosen. He felt a mixture of shame, grief, and pity" (Ekwensi 23).

Ekwensi builds on a construction of character similar to Zola's Nana, who leads men to their ruin, as Freddie becomes more convinced that Jagua will ruin him. Arriving to visit Jagua in their apartment, Freddie finds Jagua entertaining three influential men, and he comprehends the reason instantly:

Living in Lagos had taught him that this was the way it worked. The men came to a woman like Jagua in the daytime, socially. Then individually they sneaked back at night or in the morning when the officeworkers were pouring over their files beneath waving overhead fans. At such times they drank beer and paid for the 'love' they bought (Ekwensi 31).

Faced with this situation, Freddie becomes aware that to Jagua he is "mere sentiment" (Ekwensi 30); he sees her truly with her body advertising it is dressed to sell, and the heavy makeup of a whore and he feels pain--"the torture of being held in sexual bondage by a woman very much older than he was, more cunning and ambitious and infinitely more possessive" (Ekwensi 33). Jagua pleads innocence about the men's presence, but Freddie's heart hardens against her; he is convinced that Jagua will destroy him. Enticed by Nancy's youth and the dissimilarity between Nancy's innocence and Jagua's experience, Freddie makes love to Nancy, promising to marry her and all the while "contrasting her skin which was firm and elastic with Jagua's flabby and soggy for all the artifice" (Ekwensi 38). Jagua catches them in bed together, and she rips Freddie's immigration papers to England into tiny pieces and throws his possessions from
their apartment. Freddie is stunned by the elements which could have caused his downfall—Jagua’s rage and power and the "scarification from the flames" (Ekwensi 42)

Although Jagua loses Freddie to Nancy, Jagua does not surrender her plan to regain an honored place in his attention; she uses her experience, the counterpart to Nancy’s youth, to complete this task. Through the loss of Freddie and by completing her plans, Jagua reaches a heroic status and later becomes an active political figure. After Freddie leaves for England, she decides to visit his home village, Bagana, to gain the admiration of his family; however, Jagua reaches Bagana to find Mama Nancy and her daughter installed as guests in Freddie’s home, and Nancy has learned native dances and receives the family’s support. Jagua realizes that she must “endear them to herself by showing her experience of life;” she must form a goal "infinitely larger than excelling at Bagana dancing" (Ekwensi 83).

The heroic outcome requires that Jagua use her beauty and prestige to her advantage. The goal which Jagua achieves is somewhat accidental and yet it makes her a hero amongst Freddie’s relatives. Jagua and Nancy are warned to avoid the shore opposite their lake, leading to Krinameh, the home of Chief Ofubara, enemy of Bagana. While they bathe one morning they fight over Freddie, and Nancy is captured by Krinameh natives. Blaming herself for the capture and knowing that Freddie’s relatives blame her, Jagua volunteers to visit Chief Ofubara on Nancy’s behalf. She dresses provocatively and makes herself really "Jagua" (88), a role she plays with abandon to save Nancy and to promote
herself:

She gave him herself with an abandon calculated to shock and delight him. The feigned noises, practised over the years, the carefully punctuated sighs and cries of pain, the sudden flexing of thighs and neck. . . All these she performed with a precision which surprised herself. It was a long time since she had played her true role (Ekwensi 95).

Chief Ofubara asks to marry her, paying her a bride price of 100 pounds. Jagua laughs, but she knows the reward, remaining with him for ten days: "She stroked his hair tenderly and laughed the submissive laughter of the practiced whore, brassy, with an eye to the gold coins in the trousers pocket" (Ekwensi 96).

Khalid Kishtainy comments on the meaning of this situation:

Yet her art is not the only factor which inflames the man's desire. It is the first time, Ekwensi emphasizes, that Chief Ofubara has experienced the sensation of African woman as an equal partner, and the experience makes the master her slave, ready to obey her maddest whims. (But is she actually an equal partner? She is only pretending, like everyone in the emergent nations) (83).

This passage promotes the idea that the inequalities of colonialism still exist in the emergent nations.

Despite her desire for money, Jagua's desire to gain the admiration of Freddie's family is stronger. Jagua's ability to restore peace to Bagana and Krinameh amazes Freddie's family; she is heroic in assuming this political role, feeling the "proud glow heroes must feel on their return, victorious" (Ekwensi 96). As Chief Ofubara and Uncle Namme embrace, Jagua replays this joyful scene in her head for years; she relives "her victory in bringing the two feuding villages
together was far greater than Nancy's mastery of the Bagana dance" (Ekwensi o
Jagua's momentary removal from prostitution; she perceives alternatives to
prostitution, such as marriage to Chief Ofubara, and her brother's influence
precipitates her departure from the profession. Jagua's brother Fonso entreats
her to leave prostitution, telling her that she is not respectable: "My dear sister,
is time you stop your loose life. Is a shameful thing to me, your brother. I got a
beautiful sister like you. God made you with dignity; an' when I think of your kind
of life. . .. Come home and stay in the family. You don' wan' to marry. Awright.
Nobody forcing you. Den keep yourself with respect" (Ekwensi 103). Jagua
agrees to start a business as a Merchant Princess, who, according to Fonzo, are
independent, free, grown-ups, who turn their minds to business, not frivolities .
(103). To prove she is not "useless," Jagua sets up a stall to earn money by
selling goods, but, following a few weeks of this occupation, she senses the
danger--becoming "more provincial and less Jagua-ful" (105). She must return
to Lagos to counter this threat.

Upon her return to Lagos, Jagua resumes prostitution, relishing its
freedom and the title bestowed on her by it:

JAGWA. She gave herself the title now, whispering it
and summoning up in her mind all the fantastic elegance
it was supposed to conjure up. . . . It was like an invocation.
She was sure that men would like her much more now. Men,
she discovered, found a strange appeal in a woman who
they knew but who had been away on holiday (Ekwensi 107).

Jagua meets three people who admire her strange appeal and who alter the

course of her life: Dennis Odoma, a petty thief active in politics, Rosa, a younger
prostitute who becomes Jagua's companion and friend, and Uncle Taiwo, the leader of the corrupt political group O.P. 2, who becomes her latest conquest. As Dennis becomes a fugitive wanted for robbery, Jagua realizes that her occupation places her beneath the control of such corrupt characters; she is nothing more than a pawn to further their situation:

She knew now that if a girl went to *Tropicana* every day, that girl was a pawn in the hands of criminals, Senior Service men, contractors, thieves, detectives, liars, cheats, the rabble, the scum of the country's grasping hands and headlong rush to `civilization,' 'sophistication,' and all the falsehood it implied (Ekwensi 128).

Ekwensi connects the conflict in politics to the colonial influence in Nigeria. Jagua enters prostitution due to European influences; she accepts a position as the mistress of a European, who gives her an allowance so she may travel to locations of European influence:

She had heard that the women of Accra were Jagua-ful. They were the real black mermaids from the Guinea Gulf and their ideas came from Paris... She lowered the neckline of her sleeveless blouses and raised the heels of her shoes. She did her hair in the Jagua-mop, wore ear-rings that really rang bells, as she walked with deliberately swinging hips. She was out-Jagwaring the real Jaguas (Ekwensi 170).

Although Jagua, through her wearing of British fashions, represents the embodiment of the British world, she slowly sees that this embodiment is an empty one. Shortly after Jagua reaches the realization that she is a wager in a political world, Freddie returns from England, formal and poised, and Jagua notes their separation keenly. She is an outsider to him, the embodiment of "the
dream she has always wanted," (Ekwensi 134) and her dream now belongs to Nancy, Freddie's wife and mother of his two children. Jagua learns that Freddie plans to oppose Uncle Taiwo for the Oblana constituency; his motivation, like Uncle Taiwo's, is money; he sees politics as his only hope to gain it (Ekwensi 137).

Ekwensi emphasizes the corruption of city politics and its concentration on appearances as Jagua becomes an active figure in politics. Due to Taiwo's influence, Jagua assumes a political status while she addresses a crowd of Nigerian women. Taiwo advises her to “tell them all the lie” : “When Uncle Taiwo win, dem will never remember anythin' about dis promise. Tell dem ah'm against women paying tax. Is wrong, is wicked. Tell dem ah'm fighting for equality of women. Women must be equal to all men” (Ekwensi 142). These lies indicate the importance of appearances in politics; Taiwo wants the women to believe that he supports gender equality. Jagua obeys Taiwo, relishing the power and attention of influencing the women. Again, Ekwensi demonstrates the attention paid to appearances in politics. Jagua bashes Freddie, Taiwo's opponent, telling the women that he has married a foreigner from one thousand miles away and therefore cannot comprehend the needs of Nigerian women (146). The crowd adores her speech and her methods, and Jagua feels the results of her revenge: “She felt truly proud. She had struck the first nail. Freddie would soon be buried” (Ekwensi 147). Her need for revenge increases as Nancy yells at her for visiting Freddie: “She would show Nancy that a harlot can wield great power over men's homes” (150). Thus, the desecration of politics seems to incite
Jagua to concentrate on surface appearances and to desire revenge and power.

However, it is not Jagua who holds the power to alter men's lives; the power belongs to men like Uncle Taiwo, who possess money. Following a disagreement with Taiwo, Freddie is murdered by Taiwo's thugs, and Jagua reacts to the political forces, which she now realizes are beyond her control:

Jagua walked home in fear. She was thinking how very stupid the police can be, how ordinary people she knew became transformed by this strange devil they called politics. When so transformed a man placed no value on human life. All that mattered was power, the winning of seats, the front-page appearance in the daily papers, the name read in the news-bulletins of the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (Ekwensi 155).

Once empowered by the desire for prestige, Jagua now realizes the implications of such a desire, realizing that the root of this aspiration is corruption. This realization is made implicit as Uncle Taiwo loses the election for the Oblana constituency:

All that money, all those promises, all the energy lavished on campaigning and paying hired thugs one pound per day, all that had been wasted. But most terrifying of all, she knew that Uncle Taiwo was terrified of the retribution. His party did not stand for failures. And as Secretary of O.P.2 he must carry full blame. . . .Jagua hung her head. Although she did not know it yet, her own loss was much the greatest (Ekwensi 161-162).

Jagua determines that her reasons for moving to the city have been challenged: her needs for freedom, the desire for neat appearances, and the wish for a power equal to that of men. Before moving to Lagos, Jagua considers her move to the city: "She had heard of Lagos where the girls were glossy,
worked in offices like the men, danced, smoked, wore high-heeled shoes and narrow slacks, and were ‘free’ and ‘fast’ with their favours” (Ekwensi 167). She moves to enter city life, removing herself from connection with her village: “Like Freddie she was an Ibo from Eastern Nigeria, but when she spoke to him she always used pidgin English, because living in Lagos City they did not want any embarrassing reminders of class or custom” (Ekwensi 5). In recognizing the dangers of politics, Jagua finds that degradation is the result of believing the city ideal. Taiwo leaves money with her, and Rosa and Jagua are wanted by the police for their connection to his party. They flee to Rosa’s home in a slum of Lagos, where Jagua’s blame and loss are actualized:

Jagua looked at the degradation. Bare floor which came off in powdery puffs if you rubbed your foot too hard. The bed was in the same room, wooden, with a mattress stuffed with the kind of grass cut by prisoners at the racecourse. Rosa had become—like many women who came to Lagos, like Jagua herself—imprisoned, entangled in the city, unable to extricate herself from its clutches. The lowest and the most degraded standards of living were to her preferable to a quiet and dignified life in her own home where she would not be ‘free’ (Ekwensi 165).

Both women have associated their migrations to the city with freedom. Under the bonds of political forces, under the rigidity of shame, the city has robbed them of the freedom they thought they lacked in their home villages. It takes a return to village life for both women to possess freedom from degradation and from politics.

Jagua finally removes herself from prostitution, finding reliance in herself
in the process and acknowledging the emptiness of city life. Her father is dying, calling her name on his death bed, and she feels such shame at the life she has chosen that she refuses to return home with her brother: "She had been wayward and had come to Lagos to pursue the Tropicana lights and the glittering laughter of seductive men, the sequin sheen of the fickle fashions. . . . Husbandless, parentless she had roamed the Nigerian world, a woman among the sophisticates with hollowness for a background" (Ekwensi 175). She remains with her mother and brothers after her father's death--"free but in a new and penitent way," (Ekwensi 180) her brothers' decree. She is content with the solitude and calm nature of village existence.

After Jagua conceives a child with a man from Lagos, she resolves never to be "so reckless with the ingredients of the fast life and faster oblivion" (Ekwensi 190) in the care of her child. Khalid Kishtainy comments on Jagua's connection to corruption in the city:

Ekwensi seems to give support to an attitude shared by other black writers, as was pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, namely that free love equals freedom, in the political and economic sense. *Jagua Nana*, however, as a novel suffers from other defects, and the behavior of the heroine remains bewildering. But the work as a whole falls within the category of African literature portraying the underworld life of industrial and commercial cities as an open trap for the original virtue and innocence of Africa (84).

Unlike Kishtainy, I do not find Jagua's behavior bewildering in light of the context presented. Her father's death brings her previous frivolous choices into bold outline. She names the baby Nnochi, meaning replacement for her father, but
the child lives only two days. Jagua’s mother questions her about plans for the future, and Jagua tells her that she wants to purchase her own shop. In the city Jagua would never have dreamt of such a plan; she never would have dreamt at all, concentrating instead on sheer pleasure.

Jagua’s representation is complex; the ending shows the clear difference between greedy, vain, pleasure-seeking Jagua in the city and the serene Jagua returned to tradition: “She thought how good it was to be dreaming while Rosa and her mother listened” (Ekwensi 192). Jagua also believes that God will bless her, an attitude she never held in the city. Khalid Kishtainy examines the ending: “Although Jagua Nana loses her only child during her adventures, she... finds her own salvation and self-respect in the end” (84). Jagua’s escape from prostitution, resulting in the loss of her vanity and the loss of her desire for city life, could be linked to her child’s conception with a man from the city; because Nnochi personifies a connection to the city, the child must die. These losses remove Jagua from the corrupt political forces from the city, and Jagua realizes her potential, deciding to open her own shop. The return to the tradition of her family and the replacement of her vanity by religious serenity free her from the workings of politics, forcing her into a self-reliance which prostitution, connected as it is to Nigerian politics, cannot allow.
Chapter 4: Wanja the Creator, Wanja the Transformer

I will sing you a song of a town
And of Wanja who started it;
How she turned a bedbug of a village
Into a town, Theng'eta town.
I remember when she first came to Ilmorog
I said: Who is that damsel come to sink my heart,
         My village?
Now you wagging tongues
Cast eyes around you,
See the work wrought by her industry.
We greet you, Wanja Kahii,
We greet you with ululations.
Who said that only in a home with a male child
Will the head of a he-goat be roasted in feast?
Didn't your beauty bring down an aeroplane?
Didn't your breath bring forth a city? (Ngugi 264).

This song, situated at the center of Petals of Blood, glorifies Wanja, a prostitute, for the progress she has brought to Ilmorog, the village in which she lives; it praises her for her work and her beauty. Through the song, Wanja, a key figure in the novel, portrays the rural to urban shift, which moves the novel through to its conclusion. The message of the song ties the emergence of Ilmorog the city to Wanja, whose unique breath brings the city into existence.

Petals of Blood, which shifts between the past and the present and between a third-person narrative and Munira's first-person account of events, focuses around the investigation of the murders of three prominent businessmen in New Ilmorog. The central characters--Gregory Munira a schoolteacher, Abdulla the owner of a bar, Wanja a prostitute, and Karega the leader of a worker's union--are each suspected of setting the fire which killed Mzigo,
Kimeria, and Chui. The officer investigating the case summarizes his interest in the contrasting personalities it brings together: Chui--an educationist and businessman; Hawkins Kimeria--a business tycoon; Abdulla --a petty trader; Karega--a trade unionist; Mzigo--an educationist turned businessman; Munira--a teacher and man of God; Wanja--a prostitute (Ngugi 44). His job is to determine what sequence of events brought this range of characters together and which of them committed the murder. While the novel encompasses the investigation’s progress, it also outlines Ilmorog’s development from a village to a city and the coinciding corruption in the Kenyan government. Munira, Abdulla, Wanja, and Karega contribute to the alteration of Ilmorog from village to city, but Wanja is the character to whom the progress is attributed.

Wanja, then, in influencing the progress from village to city, is a model of enactment. Like each of the depictions of prostitutes I examined, Wanja moves toward and away from prostitution. However, in resisting prostitution and monetary gain completely, Wanja reaches a political status which does not serve herself, as Jagua’s status does, but which serves the needs of others and the needs of her country. Esther Smith, critiquing images of women during the colonial period of African literature, presents the idea that Wanja opposes the oppression surrounding her: “Wanja sees suddenly that she does have other options. She chooses to turn her back on a lucrative trade, and to take a strong stand against the perpetrators of economic oppression in her town” (41). Wanja influences others to act against neo-colonial corruption, while she acts against it herself. In the process, she reaches a self-reliance, which allows for her
cooperation with others.

While her portrayal exposes her humanity in a far from stereotypical depiction, Wanja also functions as a symbol. Wanja represents the struggle of Kenya to resist neo-colonial structures, but Wanja gains power from this symbolic status. Although Ngugi deemphasizes Wanja’s individuality on one level, making her representative of Kenya and of the African continent as a whole, on another level, Ngugi’s Wanja indicates societal problems in two ways—through her position as a prostitute and through her position as a woman.

Because of her link to the progress of Ilmorog, the character of Wanja in Petals of Blood, operates as a sign of societal corruption. She is neither completely wicked or cruel nor a tender, caring woman. Because Wanja possesses numerous faults as well as redeemable qualities, she is human in a way that few previous portrayals of prostitutes reveal. While her portrayal exposes her humanity in a far from stereotypical depiction, Wanja becomes a symbol as Ngugi parallels her occupation with the situation of the remainder of the characters; in this world shaped by colonial forces, under the dominions of base rulers, all citizens of Kenya are prostituted. In this postcolonial society, Wanja thus is both prostitute and prostituted.

Meaning "stranger" or "outsider" (Davies 143), Wanja’s name also amplifies Ngugi’s analogy. Existing outside the customary women’s roles in Ilmorog, Wanja depicts colonialism in Kenya with her desire for power, influence, and money; she enjoys "the elation at seeing a trick--a smile, a certain look, maybe even raising one’s brow, or a gesture like carelessly brushing against a
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customer--turn a man into a captive and sighing fool" (Ngugi 56). Like elite Kenyans doting on their neocolonial status, Wanja adores her power. However, Wanja, in the end, releases material power, replacing it with self-reliance.

Before examining the symbolism of Wanja's prostitution, one first should attempt to comprehend what the author achieves by placing a female and a prostitute at the center of this novel. Ngugi's remarks in Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary about Devil on the Cross, a novel he composed in prison, also refer to the depictions of African women in his previous novels, including Petals of Blood:

Because the women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being. Had I not seen glimpses of this type in real life among the women of Kamirithy Community Education and Cultural Centre? Isn't Kenyan history replete with this type of woman? Mau Mau women cadres? Waringa [heroine of Devil on the Cross] will be the fictional reflection of this resistance heroine of Kenyan history. Waringa heroine of toil. . .there she walks (10-11).

Wanja fills a corresponding position in Petals of Blood; she is a "daughter of the drought," (Ngugi 109) and thus a heroine of toil in her rural setting and a heroine also experiencing the exploitation of prostitution. Avoiding any hint of the archetypical patterns of characterization for Wanja, Ngugi simultaneously avoids Carole Boyce Davies's description of the portrayal of women in colonial African novels: "Women are usually made peripheral to [social and political implications
of colonialism and man's struggle within and away from its confines] and function
either as symbols or as instruments for the male hero's working out of his
problems" (3). Wanja's strength and ultimate rise above adversity make her
more than a mere symbol or instrument for a male character; she is a character
symbolic in her own right. Instead, Ngugi grants her feminist beliefs, which follow
Filomena Steady's key features of African feminism: "female autonomy and
cooperation; an emphasis on nature over culture; the centrality of children,
multiple mothering and kinship; the use of ridicule in African woman's worldview,
(6) leading to an overall "abnegation of male protection and a determination to
be resourceful and reliant" (Davies 7).

However, before Wanja formulates a determination to reach self-reliance,
she relies on the use of others, specifically men, for survival. Molara Ogundipc-
Leslie, commenting on the tiers of oppression in African women's experience,
emphasizes that the recognition of self challenges the African woman because
she must define her own freedom:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries
of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender
hierarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are
often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with her dependency
complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-
assertive actions are needed (Davies 8).

Wanja's reaction to her prostitution complies with this description. She seeks to
please and to control men: "For a woman, anyway, it is a good feeling when a
thousand eyes turn toward you and you feel that it is your body that is giving
orders to all their hearts" (Ngugi 129). She leaves prostitution to embrace it
again, a self-defeating behavior, and ultimately she asserts herself, to resist its confines and to discover confidence and control in herself.

Through Wanja’s transformations, Ngugi depicts the twofold prostitution he perceives within Kenya—the prostitution of the country by neo-colonialism and the exploitation of independent Kenya by immoral African governmental officials. In *Detained*, he compares Kenya’s neo-colonial status to blatant prostitution:

Nyerere once rightly compared those African regimes who dote on their neo-colonial status to a prostitute who walks with proud display of the fur coat given to her by her moneyed lover. Actually the situation of a comprador ruling class is more appropriately comparable to that of a pimp who would proudly hold down his mother to be brutally raped by foreigners, and then shout in glee: look at the shining handful of dollars I have received for my efficiency and integrity, in carrying out my part of the bargain (13).

Ngugi integrates a similar comparison in the novel as a prostitute’s encounter with a foreign customer, a story Wanja relates:

There was this woman. She was very rich... She would come to where I used to work in Lower Kabete. She would say: Wanja, I can get you a European boyfriend. She herself had been a teacher and then a secretary. But she made money after office hours. Anyway she had married a very old European. over seventy years... people said that after she had made him make a will, she had thrown him down the steps in the house. She got all his wealth (Ngugi 130-131).

This example accurately depicts the downward spiral Ngugi views in Kenya; the woman parades her wealth gained from prostitution of foreigners, marriage to a European, and murder of the foreign husband. In prostituting the foreigner who, in turn, is prostituting her, the woman takes his name, his land, and his money as
her own. She wants Wanja to emulate her materialistic actions. Yet Wanja chooses self-reliance, rather than reliance on material goods by the novel's end.

Ngugi evokes the idea that self-reliance is spiritual power by portraying common people who resist governmental oppression in this novel, as well as in several of his others. He has remarked on his admiration of self-reliant men and women who fought against colonial silence and fear in the Mau Mau rebellion, commenting on this culture:

This culture generated courage, not fear; defiance of oppression, not submission; pride in self and one's country, not cowardly acceptance of national humiliation; loyalty to Kenya, not its betrayal to imperialism (Ngugi *Detained* 66).

Women were especially valued in the rebellion, as peasants and workers acted on their feelings:

The 1950's saw the Mau Mau armed struggle and Kenyan women played a heroic role in the fighting in the forests and mountains, and in prisons and detention camps, and in the homes. They were everywhere (Ngugi *Barrel* 41).

Before recognizing their contribution to Mau Mau, Ngugi stresses the leadership of women throughout Kenya's history--Me Katilili who organized Giriama youth against the British colonial administration in 1913-1914 and Mary Muthoni Nyanjiru who led a worker's demonstration to protest the arrest and detaining of Harry Thuku by the British (Ngugi *Barrel* 41). What Ngugi recognizes as the main lesson of Kenya's history--the suppression of people's movements and their later reemergence with strength and determination--emerges in *Petals of Blood* as a "history of grandeur and dignity and fearless resistance to foreign
economic, political, and cultural domination" (Ngugi Writers in Politics 98). As a result of this novel, Ngugi wishes Kenyans to "gather petals of revolutionary love" (Writers in Politics 98).

In relation to his country’s exploitation by elite Kenyans, Ngugi describes the scramble within Kenya for material power in tourism and money, a scramble shown in Petals of Blood:

The settler prostituted women, as when Karl Peters publicly hanged his African mistress because she preferred the company of her Kenyan brothers to his own. His pupils today have gone into the whole game with greater gusto: tourism, as practiced today, can only thrive on the virtual prostitution of the whole country, becoming a sacred industry with shrines, under the name of hotels and lodges in all the cities and at the seaside. The modern-day Karl Peters need not use the gun to deter rivals. The name of the game now is money (Detained 58-59).

As the original colonists prostituted women, Ngugi suggests the modern structure of Kenya relies on money, making its citizens prostitutes. The construction of Ilmorog reflects this reliance on money when the town is divided into residences for the officials with money (Cape Town) and a shanty town of common people including migrant workers, unemployed, prostitutes and traders in tin and scrap metal, ironically called New Jerusalem. The landlords and officials of this shanty town prostitute the citizens for money, as Munira explains:

‘You’ll be surprised to see the landlords who come to collect the rent...No shame...they drive up in their Mercedes Benzes..and they have been known to lock the poor souls out. Occasionally, the Town Council has a clean-up, burn-down campaign...but surprisingly...it is the shanties put up by the unemployed and the rural migrant poor which get razed to the ground. And do you see those kiosks by the road? A year
ago there was a big scandal about them. Some County Councillors and officials were allocated them...free... and then sold them for more than fifty thousand shillings to others who rent them out to petty women traders' (Ngugi *Petals of Blood* 282).

Wanja herself returns to prostitution while the modern structure of Kenya falls to corruption: "This world...this Kenya...this Africa only knows one law. You eat somebody or you are eaten. You sit on somebody or somebody sits on you...I did throw it, my newly born, into a latrine...As for me, it's a game...of money..." (Ngugi *Petals of Blood* 291, 293). The disposal of Wanja's child and her indifference to the disposal symbolizes the conditions of the newly independent Kenya; Ngugi may suggest that the modern Africans act similarly by indifferently tossing away their futures into corrupt governmental structures. To illustrate the arrival of New Kenya, Ngugi displays Wanja's treatment of Munira when he encounters her in a bar enacting her newfound dependence on money and her submission to foreign standards of beauty: "On her lips was smudgy red lipstick; her eyebrows were pencilled and painted a luminous blue. On her head was a flaming red wig...Wanja really was a new her" (*Petals of Blood* 279). After she flaunts her new look, Wanja insists upon payment before having sex with Munira: "This is New Kenya. You want it, you pay for it, for the bed and the light and my time and the drink I shall later give you and the breakfast tomorrow...And all for a hundred shillings" (Ngugi 279).

Eventually, Wanja, along with the other main characters, confronts the division of the New Kenya and the choice between traditional and new values
within herself. She represents the struggle of the modern Kenyans to free themselves from a corrupt government and society. The movement of the novel and the transformations in Wanja's life mirror the struggle of the characters to overcome oppressive forces in their lives. Wanja is the nucleus of this world of injustice, and this world prostitutes the main characters as Karega attempts to convince Wanja to halt the injustice by resisting her search for monetary gain:

We are all prostitutes, for in a world of grab and take, in a world built on a structure of inequality and injustice, in a world where some can eat while others can only toll, some can send their children to schools and others cannot, in a world where a prince, a monarch, a business man can sit on billions while people starve or hit their heads against church walls for divine deliverance from hunger, yes, in a world where a man who has never set foot on this land can sit in a New York or London office and determine what I shall eat, read, think, do only because he sits on a heap of billions taken from the world's poor, in such a world, we are all prostitutes (Ngugi Petals 240).

Wanja illustrates this injustice and oppression from the past, which Ngugi unquestionably believes may be resisted. Each character "finds in her the reflection of his being" (Ngugi 322); their transformations mirror her transformation from oppression to liberation.

The multiple transformations in Wanja as a character indicate the oncoming social transformations in the other characters. The shifts occur on different levels, but symbolize the political battles of all. From examining these shifts, one becomes aware that, on one level, Wanja embodies the political conflict of African women to free themselves from stifling forces; on another level, she embodies the struggle of the Kenyan people. In her critique of the
female images in *Petals of Blood*, Jennifer Evans writes that the female images "suggest that in this struggle for total liberation women have a vital role to play" (65). This progression from bondage to liberation pervades the novel and affects Wanja's character.

Wanja's shift from hopelessness and weakness to power exhibits the liberation of women through African feminism. After she moves from the city to Ilmorog, Wanja rapidly tires of the village and its conditions:

`Why should anybody end up in this hole of a place? Look at the women scratching the earth. Look at them. What do they get in return? What did we call by the name of harvest? A few grains of maize.`...And now she laughed. Not from deep in her stomach but from her throat: a bitter, deep ironic laughter (Ngugi 74-75).

Mocking the work of her fellow women and rejecting the village's source of income, Wanja mocks and rejects herself. Although she is employed as a barmaid, she also spends time laboring in the fields. Her attitude defies the traditional village structure, and, as a result, she returns to the city and prostitution. By the novel's end, Wanja realizes that she must make a deliberate choice to find herself. After Karega tells her that she has chosen KCO (a government organization) and imperialism to aid the rich against the poor, she decides to stop exploiting herself:

She had chosen...In doing so, she had murdered her own life and now she took her final burial in poverty and degradation as a glorious achievement. She could not now return to a previous state of innocence. But she could do something about her present circumstances...She would have her vengeance. It would be a kind of grand finale to a career of always being trodden upon, a career of endless shame and degradation (Ngugi *Petals* 328)
Rather than continuing to permit others to manipulate her, Wanja decides to exploit in return; she concocts a scheme to invite four prominent businessmen to her home to stage their murders. Wanja's plan misfires; she only succeeds in killing one man, but the resulting investigation fails to reveal this fact. Thus, Ngugi frees her from the bonds of her past.

The autonomy Wanja secures leaves her a new kinship with herself and with other women—a kinship she did not formerly possess as a prostitute. Wanja acquires a new bond with her mother from whom she was estranged: "They just talked, softly, treading toward the past, but never quite bringing it out in the open" (Ngugi Petals 337). Through this cooperation, Wanja releases her past and embraces her future, sharing with her mother that she is pregnant. Wanja does not marry the father of her child in the end, and Jennifer Evans has written that this situation demonstrates that "her liberation is not to be achieved through her union with a man, but through her fulfillment as an independent woman" (64). Only through independence may Wanja recognize and rely on herself.

Other characters change as a consequence of their relationships with Wanja and deliberately adopt distinctive directions for their lives. Munira is transformed from a quiet schoolteacher to an outspoken religious fundamentalist. To Munira, Wanja is the epitome of the femme fatale. He is drawn to what he terms her coquetry, and he desires to remove her power:

Munira felt her even more remote: as if he had never touched her: her taunt had the same alluring power as the beckoning coquetry of a virgin: he could touch her
only by deflowering her by force and so flowering himself in blood. A virgin and a prostitute. Why couldn’t she carry an interesting label on her back: Drive a VW: Ride a Virgin Whore: Or VIP: Very Interesting Prostitute (Ngugi Petals of Blood 76).

Munira attributes his subsequent downfall, his involvement in the murders of the officials, to Wanja. Under questioning by an officer to admit the truth, Munira thinks of blaming Wanja—"wanting to show him that Wanja was the ‘She’ mentioned by the Prophets, extracting obedience from men, making them deviate from the path, and all the time with a voice that had the suggestive powers of suffering and protest, hope and terror and above all of escape through the power of the flesh" (Ngugi Petals of Blood 42). Abdulla, a crippled man once a heroic Mau Mau warrior, saves Wanja’s life—an act he never dreamed he could complete. He reaches the realization that the forces of oppression continue to be fought:

Maybe, he thought, history was a dance in a huge arena of God. You played your part, and then you left the arena, swept aside by the waves of a new step, a new movement in the dance. . . . His time was over. But he was glad that he had saved a life when he was on the mission of taking one, and he would be happy to know that Wanja was happy and that sometimes she remembered him (Ngugi Petals of Blood 340).

Finally and most significantly, Karega shifts from a position as a student with a lack of direction to act as a strong leader of a worker's movement confronting corrupt governmental structures. Because of his encounter with Wanja, he has a focused vision he did not possess before:

These few who had prostituted the whole land turning it
over for foreigners for thorough exploitation would drink people's blood and say hypocritical prayers of devotion to skin oneness and to nationalism even as skeletons of bones walked to lonely graves. The system and its gods and its angels had to be fought consciously, consistently and resolutely by all the working people!...Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system. . . Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joying and loving in creative labor (Ngugi Petals of Blood 344).

Each man converts his ways under Wanja's influence, and these conversions strengthen each man. Ngugi obviously discerns the liberation of women as beneficial for both genders and as an indication of a movement toward a better future.

Ngugi's depiction of social transformation in the novel, the movement from past to future, also centers around Wanja's liberation and impending motherhood. After she departs Ilmorog and returns to prostitution, Wanja resolves to break with her shameful past—"that she would not again obey the power of her body over men; that any involvement was out until she had defeated the past through a new flowering of self" (Ngugi Petals 106-107). Wanja defeats the past and achieves a literal and figurative flowering of self by rejecting prostitution and by conceiving the child she so desires: "And suddenly she felt lifted out of her own self, she felt waves of emotion she had never before experienced. . . . When it was over, she felt a tremendous calm, a kind of inner assurance of the possibilities of a new kind of power" (Ngugi Petals 338).

Understanding the emphasis on motherhood in African society is crucial for understanding Wanja's power. Since "motherhood defines womanhood"
(Davies 243), Wanja acquires societal status through the conception of a child. Carol Davies, writing on motherhood in the works of male and female Igbo writers, quotes Filomina Steady who writes about the concept of motherhood:

The most important factor with regard to the woman in traditional society is her role as mother and the centrality of this role as a whole. Even in strictly patrilineal societies, women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of the husband’s lineage and it is because of women that the men have a patrilineage at all. The importance of motherhood and the evaluation of childbearing capacity by African women is probably the most fundamental difference between the African woman and her Western counterpart in their common struggle to end discrimination against women (Davies 243).

In these works, Davies argues that “motherhood is crucial to the happiness of the woman and to her ability to control her life” (245). She admits that one may consider this an anti-feminist argument, but she insists it is not, based on Steady’s definition and the centrality of children. Thus, Wanja may gain power from the conception of her child, a feminist concept.

Fire is a force of power and purification in the movement from the past to present. Ngugi seems to associate fallen or "bad" women with fire and the past. Munira mentions his encounter with Amina, "a bad woman at Kamiritho" (Ngugi Petals 14). To compensate for his sin with Amina and to feel purified, a young Munira burns an imitation of her hut from cowdung. The fire is not extinguished and nearly consumes a barn during the night. Munira fails to admit his actions to his father, concealing his guilt. Wanja constructs a second example of fire and its association with memories of impure women. She relates the story of her
cousin, who flees to the city to escape an abusive husband and reappears "glittered in new clothes and earrings" before the town (Ngugi Petals 64). The abusive husband attempts to murder the returned cousin, but Wanja's aunt mistakenly dies in the flames he sets. Wanja evaluates this destruction through fire:

I have liked to believe that she burnt herself like the Buddhists do, which then makes me think of the water and the fire of the beginning and the water and the fire of the second coming to cleanse and bring purity to our earth of human cruelty and loneliness (Ngugi 65).

She perceives fire and self-destruction as a means of accumulating purity: "I have felt as if I could set myself on fire. And then I would run to the mountain top so that everyone could see me cleansed to my bones" (Ngugi Petals 65). Wanja describes her life "running from one fire into greater flames" (Ngugi Petals 321), yet she has not been cleansed of guilt.

To be "pure" and to be cleansed of guilt, Wanja must reject prostitution. Phoenix-like, she survives a fire that kills three prominent officials (Evans 63).

Ngugi endows Wanja with regenerative properties and the recognition of freedom from her past actions:

She rested on her bed in the old hut, turning over...these images that refused to be burnt out of her life and memory. She wanted a new life...clean...she felt this was the meaning of her recent escape! Already she felt the stirrings of a new person...she had after all been baptised by fire...Maybe life was a series of false starts, which, once discovered, called for more renewed efforts at yet another beginning (Ngugi 337).

The flame of Wanja's past no longer consumes; it purifies. Her escape from
death and knowledge of the child she carries bestows on Wanja the possibility to start anew.

Before and after the division in Ilmorog, Ngugi clearly defines gender roles of men and women. Crucial in the New Kenya is the occupation of the barmaid—"one of the most insecure, low paid and humiliating jobs in Kenya and into which hundreds of girls are forced in the modern Kenya dancing to the tune of U.S. military bases, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank" (Ngugi Barrel 39). Wanja works as a barmaid in Ilmorog and in the city. Ngugi explains the way this position influences the oppression of women as suppliers of labor in colonies and neocolonies and as those suffering "the weight of male prejudices in both feudalism and imperialism" (Ngugi 41). To illustrate women's compromised position, he cites the example of Ngaahika Ndeenda (I will marry when I want), a Gikuyu language play in which a factory worker explains to a peasant mother whose daughter works as a barmaid that oppression must be overcome:

Gicaambia:
Let's not call our children prostitutes. . .
Our children are not to blame. . .
We the parents have not put much effort
In the education of our girls.
Even before colonialism,
We oppressed women
Giving ourselves numerous justifications:

Women and property are not friends,
Two women are two pots of poison,
Women and the heavens are unpredictable,
Women cannot keep secrets,
A woman's word is believed only after the event.
And through many other similar sayings,
Forgetting that a home belongs to man and woman.
That the country belongs to boys and girls.
Do you think it was only the men
Who fought for Kenya's independence?
How many women died in the forests?
Today when we face problems
We take it out on our wives,
Instead of holding a dialogue
To find ways and means of removing darkness from the land
(Ngugi Barrel 39-40).

In Ngugi's mind, the workers and peasants have no choice but to revolt--to begin
a revolution to destroy the oppression of women--to begin a dialogue between
men and women to solve problems and to establish equality by promoting the
value and contributions of both genders. Therefore, Ngugi desires gender
equality, "seeing the woman's struggle as being intricately connected to the total
struggle" (Davies 11).

This establishment of equality and solving of problems occurs at the
novel's end. Part of Wanja's realization of self-reliance is the realization that
cooperation empowers men and women. In sketching a reply to her mother's
question of who fathered her child, she represents her consciousness of this
power:

It was a combination of the sculpture she once saw at the
lawyer's place in Nairobi and images of Kimathi in his
moments of triumph and laughter and sorrow and terror--but
without one limb. When it was over...she felt the possibilities
of a new kind of power (Ngugi 338).

The new power existing in "the kingdom of man and woman, joying and loving in
creative labor" (Ngugi Petals 344) is Ngugi's definition of ideal gender relations;
and it is significant that through a prostitute, Wanja and the other characters reach this realization.

Before this ideal vision enters the novel, the reality of the unequal gender roles materialize. Women are valued not for their abilities but for their positions as wives and mothers, if they are valued at all. One character thinks, “Daughters he had none: and what use were they nowadays?” (Ngugi Petals 9). Wanja, telling her life story to Munira, declares that the future was easy for boys to decide “whereas with us girls the future seemed vague...It was if we knew no matter what efforts we put into our studies, our road led to the kitchen and to the bedroom” (Ngugi Petals 37). Sigrid Peicke observes such “oppression becomes the central theme” in Ngugi’s later images of women. Expanding on this comment, Tobe Levin writes:

He gives us, for example, in Petals of Blood and Devil on the Cross two young heroines aware of the politics behind their disadvantages and active in the struggle to change their societies. And though both Wanja and Jacinta personally prosper, the author shows that women as a group have been betrayed--having fought for independence, they are denied its fruits. Perhaps the value of Ngugi’s work for feminists lies here, in his dialectic vision of women in revolt. Often in the face of crushing odds, his heroines survive. They are active, courageous, defiant (Lebin 218).

In my discussion, Wanja is the most active model of an agent for change. She creates and transforms her village to a city and, in this process, transforms those around her, leading them to act against the neo-colonial influences including the corrupt governmental structures and the desire for material gain. In a world where characters are prostituted by their society, Wanja’s self-reliance,
her rejection of prostitution, and implied return to tradition free her from the
confines of neo-colonialism. Wanja--in resisting the forces of prostitution and, in
turn, the corrupt political forces around her--is a model of defiant endurance,
action, and transformation.
Conclusion

Taken separately or as a whole, the representations of prostitutes in *Petals of Blood*, *Prostitute*, *Jagua Nana*, and *Woman at Point Zero* provide a discussion which suggests other possibilities for depictions of prostitutes aside from the patterns Horn and Pringle have provided. Like Morrison’s prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*, the depictions of the prostitutes I examined are not archetypes—"those generations created in novels" (Morrison 47). In all cases, I propose that the prostitutes maintain a central position as agents of change in the works, a centrality and a strong symbolism. The depiction of societal oppression inherent in the novels, whether in the forces of politics, gender, religion, and class, propels the portrayals into opposition with Horn and Pringle’s scheme as the authors develop the prostitutes’ symbolic qualities in accordance with the oppression. The range of depictions offers the idea that prostitution is a more complex issue than Horn and Pringle’s analysis has indicated and than other analyses have indicated.

The representations of prostitutes I studied are not simplistic portrayals because the prostitutes serve as windows into societal problems. While the authors demonstrate political and societal conflicts through the representations, the prostitutes operate as political figures, and the reader views corruption through their eyes. Through the development of the prostitutes, the authors advocate societal change and show that involvement in corruption leads to degradation for all members of society; through the prostitutes they create, the
authors demonstrate the need for change in society, transformations either suggested or enacted by the prostitutes, with Ngugi's Wanja serving as the model of transformation.

In the novels I read, I propose that the prostitute's role is connected to and influenced by political forces; she is undoubtably a political figure, embodying the social conflicts of her community and her nation. Within the portrayals, there is a movement away from prostitution and a movement toward it. The prostitute in all four cases harbors the desire to remove herself from her situation, or, alternatively, to be removed from it. Two of the prostitutes succeed in building a life outside of prostitution. In the other two cases, death removes them from their circumstances. In the end, I would argue that all become independent from men, a significant move; this autonomy removes them, in some extent, to resist gender relations and to resist the oppression of political forces.

The portrayals themselves are not patterns. The behavior of the prostitutes in these novels does, nevertheless, follow a pattern, with the prostitutes moving away and moving toward prostitution. Within each of the portrayals, the women hold the desire to be removed from their situation. This removal would take them from the oppressive society. However, until each woman resolves the conflict with oppression for herself, she continues prostitution, presenting the idea that society prostitutes its members.

Further investigation of depictions of prostitutes in novels would bring contemporary representations and debates about representation of women and
of prostitutes into sharper focus, perhaps indicating, as I sought to do in my study, that the construction of the fictional prostitutes’ character displays a connection to the construction of their society. In the African novels I read, the depictions of prostitutes, then, function on a symbolic level in representing the oppression of their nations and in their function as agents for changing the oppression. As political figures, Wanja, Rosa, Jagua, and Firdaus, move outside of Horn and Pringle’s scheme of representations to become characters symbolic in their own right—strong, independent women who succeed, in one sense or another, in building a life outside of prostitution. Thus, the authors of these African works promise these women another destiny, a destiny in which the prostitutes serve as agents for political and societal change.
Works Consulted


Evans, Jennifer. "Mother Africa and the Heroic Whore: Female Images in..."


