
Unpacking the Gendered Edge of Slavery in Pre-Colonial Africa: A Critical Reading of *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* by Ayesha Harruna Atta

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Abstract:

Using Ayesha Harruna Atta's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* as a stepping-stone, this research paper sets out to delve into the gendered structure of slavery. The article argues that the straightjacket of patriarchal masculinity with its attendant human toll was instrumental in mediating female slavery in pre-colonial Africa. That slavery exacted a heavy toll amongst African women is borne out in the physical and psychological woes of such characters as Aminah, Khadija, and, to a lesser extent, Wurche. The paper also brings to light this much – slave women serve as sexual objects and domestic labour. The pervasiveness of the dead hand of patriarchy reaches out into the practice of enslavement. The sexist edge of slavery reflects in many regards, so the article posits, the power of men, whose praxis is geared towards shoring their stranglehold on women. Men wield vis-à-vis women what the American scholar John Hallaway calls 'power over,' thereby thwarting them in their well-meaning all-out drive towards full-blown 'self-actualization.' This investigation project makes the contention that one of the merits of *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* is to bring out into sharp relief the dogged refusal of women to take their patriarchy-induced lot in their strides. If anything, Aminah and Wurche's pushback bears commending since it bespeaks not only a scathing reproach to male dominance and female slavery but also a stunning tribute to sisterhood as a sure-fire way out of the predicament of women. Methodology-wise, this paper taps into an array of perspectives predicated upon the social sciences and the humanities as well as literary theory.

Keywords: Female Slavery, Gender, Patriarchy, Freedom, Trauma, Female Sexuality, Power

Introduction

The word ‘slavery’ is forever seared in the memory of black people across the board as it referred to a gruesome chapter in the history of the African continent, and, by extension, that of humanity. The lingering backwash effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade over two centuries after it was abrogated in the United States of America are hauntingly visible in every facet of life in Africa. No enterprise of human economic exploitation, and, more significantly, of reification was greater in scope and cruelty than the forced shipment of millions of folks from the coasts of Africa to the Americas for over three centuries. Slavery was human savagery of the blackest dye. The Dictionary of Contemporary English tersely defines it as “*The system of having slaves,*” and takes a slave to mean “*someone who is owned by another person and works for them for no money*” (6th Edition, 2012). In a most powerful book entitled *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, Canadian celebrated historian and academic, Paul E. Lovejoy gives a definition of slavery that captures its multi-layered intricacy. He writes:

Slavery is one form of exploitation. Its special characteristics includes the idea that slaves are property; that they are outsiders who are alien by origin or who are denied their heritage through judicial or other sanctions; that coercion can be used at will; that their labor power is at the complete disposal of the master; that they do not have the right to their own sexuality, and, by extension, to their own reproductive capacities; and that the slave status is inherited unless provision is made to ameliorate that status. (1)

Here, Lovejoy clearly emphasizes the nonentity status of the slave. The sheer fact of being someone else’s property makes the slave a sub-human, a non-being whose existence of sorts gets subsumed in a power relation heavily weighted in favour of the master. His *raison d’être* is the master on whose beck and call he is. Hence Orlando Patterson’s view of slavery as an unequalled form of subjugation. In his signal *Slavery and Social Death: A comparative Study*, he posits:

Slavery is the most extreme form of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the view points of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave. Yet it differs from other forms of extreme domination in very special ways. (1)

The history of humanity is replete with wanton horrors mediated by the sick will of one person to forcefully make another person dance to their tune. The desire for domination has wreaked untold havoc the human toll of which beggars belief. Slavery is not, repeat not, an

equalizer. The obnoxiously unflattering status of being a slave is, understandably, devoid of randomness. Enslavement occurs along criteria that feed on the division of humanity into basically two categories: ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’. This Manichean facet of enslavement is not lost upon American prominent sociologist and academic William Kornblum who is at pains to foreground inter alia racist motives in the mediation of slavery. He perceives slavery as “*the ownership of a population, defined by racial, ethnic or political criteria, by another population that not only can buy and sell members of the enslaved population but also has complete control of their lives*” (299). The time-honoured trend to substantiate the ‘othering’ and oppression of people who don’t fit into the normative set of civilized beliefs and behaviour, from a Western a vantage point, has brought out the worst in humanity. Racially and ethnically categorized peoples have run through the gauntlet of slavery and other equally forms of subjection throughout history. It would then be misguided to boil down slavery to a temporal or geographical space. The sheer fact slavery is dubbed ‘an institution’ says a mouthful. As Orlando Patterson appositely points out:

There is nothing notably peculiar about the institution of slavery. It has existed from before the dawn of human history right down to the twentieth century, in the most primitive human societies and in the most civilized. There is no region on earth that has not at some time harboured the institution. Probably there is no group of people whose ancestors were not at one time slaves or slaveholders. (vii)

Whether it be slavery in pre-colonial Africa or the trans-Atlantic slavery or any other form of domination, the end game remains the same: wielding one’s power over another to make them to one’s line for purely egotistical ends. (I’ll expand upon the dimension of power in the enslavement process later on.) The violence that unmistakably hallmarks slavery is par for the course. The subjection to enslavement is such an agonizingly dehumanizing condition that no sane person can bring themselves to wilfully pander to it without any constraints. Actually, self-sale into slavery on destitution grounds was a not marginal feature in both pre-colonial Africa and Europe (Patterson 130). Were it not for the violence attendant upon its mediation, slavery in any shape or form would never have seen the light of day, so to speak, still less become an institution. Violence is decidedly writ large in the motley array modes of acquiring slaves, viz. warfare, kidnapping, raids, or what not.

The purpose of this investigation project is two-pronged, that is delving into the sexist edge of slavery in Africa prior to the advent of colonization, and the pushback that women put up in their drive towards shedding the shackles of sex-based oppression. From enslavement to sexual abuse and beating as well as mere pawns in power dynamics, women in Africa had their fair share of slavery-induced suffering. Key to the sexist-edge to the practice of slavery is a wildly crippling straightjacket of a patriarchal mind-set that regards the woman as second-best.

Speaking of methodology, on top of a close textual analysis of the novel at hand I set out to tap into Gender/Sexuality theory as well as other perspectives drawn from the humanities cum social sciences. This in a bid to do justice to the topic. For ease of readability this research article is broken down into three sections. Firstly, I'll briefly lay out the theoretical framework with regards to the gender/sexuality field. Secondly, I'll get into the analysis proper by addressing the human toll of slavery in pre-colonial Africa due to their gender. And then wrap up with the coping strategies that women devise in their no-nonsense endeavour to cut loose from an ideology-based oppression.

I. Theoretical Framework

The multi-layered strictures that represent an albatross around women's drive towards full-blow freedom is undeniably anchored on the ideology that men are naturally born to somewhat lord it over women. Actually, it took over pretty much a quarter of a century for women to come the realization that sex-based oppression could not be done away with by winning enfranchisement and access to higher education¹. French famous twentieth-century

¹ The feminist movement can roughly be broken down into two stages, to wit 'First wave feminism' and 'Second wave feminism.' The scope of action and the contribution of each to the advancement of the female cause have varied in history. While the goals of first wave feminists were directed to winning civil rights for women and the opportunity to work outside the home, fits wave feminists geared their efforts as to the root causes of the discrimination that women were up against. Second wave feminists were instrumental in opening women's eyes to the ideological underpinnings of their oppression, and pointed to patriarchy as the source of female subservience to men. The stubborn male propensity to lord it over women is anchored on an entrenched belief in the ideology of patriarchy. Allan Johnson describes a patriarchal society as one advocating "*male privilege by male dominated, male identified and male centred*" (3). Key to 'male dominance' is the promotion of the idea that men are superior to women (6). The male identification nature of patriarchy finds expression in the fact that "core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are culturally associated with how we think about men, manhood and masculinity" (7). As for the 'male centred hue of patriarchy, it finds its meaning in the widely held belief that "*the focus of attention is on men and boys and what*

writer Simone de Beauvoir's potent statement that "*One is not born, but rather becomes, woman*" speaks to how sexual differences between man and woman are socially worked to load the dice against women. A close scrutiny of women's subjugation reveals it to be the by-product of a lopsided understanding of the biological differences man and woman. The concept that encapsulates the social construction of female subservience to men is known as Gender. In a seminal book entitled *Sex, Gender and Society* which she published back in 1972, the British sociologist, feminist and writer Ann Oakley contrasts sex and gender in order the better to underscore the shallowness of the causes of the subjugation of women. She posits:

'sex' is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. 'Gender' however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classifications into 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Qtd. In Delphy 2)

In light of the foregoing, sex can be viewed as natural whilst gender is cultural. Chris Beasley's perception of gender highlights an arbitrary division that carries far-reaching consequences. She submits that, "*'Gender' typically refers to the social process of dividing up people and social practices along the lines of their sexed identities*" (11). The said division is not an end in itself. Rather, it entails a power relation heavily weighted against women. As Beasley appositely contends, "*The two categories are not merely regarded as distinct and opposed, they are also put into a hierarchy in which one is typically cast as positive and the other negative*" (11). So it would be something of an understatement to make out that sex and gender interlock to spawn an ecosystem whereby women can only come off as second-best. The biological characteristics that mark women off from men or vice versa are weaponized against women, resulting in male dominance. So there is more to the creation of the dichotomy of sex and gender than meets the eye. Women's pushback on patriarchal masculinity results from the blinding realization that it is not natural. Anything but. Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan explain that,

they do" (10). The trinity of clout –male dominance, male identification, and male centredness – means that power is concentrated in the hands of men who make no bones about using women as sexual objects. The plight of female slaves in *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* encapsulates male power as framed in Johnson's typology. The supposed inferiority, nay negativity of femaleness is rammed into women's minds, so that they may wrap up internalizing male contrivance of inferior status.

The purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and create a consciousness among women that they were 'naturally suited for domestic roles. (56)

Patriarchal masculinity feeds on female sexuality as an instrument of solidification. From a patriarchal perspective, the body of woman is thus an enabler of male oppression. A momentous redefinition of the social condition of women occurred in the late sixties with radical feminism's perception of patriarchy, and female sexuality, as key to teasing out the subjugation of women. Katherine A. MacKinnon, a leading radical feminist and prolific writer at that, points to female sexuality as part of the social and political structures that keep women down. She writes:

Feminism has no theory of the state. It has a theory of power: sexuality is gendered as gender is sexualized. Male and female are created through the erotization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other. This is the social meaning of sex and the distinctively feminist account of gender inequality. (635)

MacKinnon's perspective locates female sexuality as a site of male display of power and sexual gratification. Pamela Abbott et al. make the contention that the erotic, social and political inform each other in sexuality. They posit:

Sexuality is generally taken to refer to the social experience and expression of physical bodily desires, real or imagined, by or for others or for oneself. It encompasses erotic desires, identities, and practices. Seemingly one of the most private, intimate aspects of our lives ... sexuality is fundamentally social and political. This is because sexuality is experienced and expressed within relations of power and exchange... (198)

The dimension of sexuality is crucial to fathoming out the source of the social condition of women. One domain of life that might help grasp fully the nefarious significance of sexuality in the subjection of women is marriage and motherhood. The prospect of barrenness and its attendant marginalization and dehumanization spells out disaster for women. In the African context where "*Marriage is about children*" (Ngcobo 144), female infertility takes a heavy emotional and physical toll that finds expression in rejection, stigmatization, dehumanization – you name it. The dynamics of power relation predicated upon sex fully plays out in *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* where women suffer the double whammy of slavery and sexual abuse.

Short Bio Data on the Author

Ayesha Harruna Atta (1983-) is a Ghanaian novelist who has won her spurs as a leading fiction writer. A bio-chemist by training and a journalist all into one, Mrs Atta has, since the inception of her literary career back in 2008, authored five novels: *Harmattan Rain*, *Saturday's Shadows*, *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, *The Deep Blue Between* and *Zainab Takes New York*. In her fictional opus, she broaches issues conspicuous by their relevance to the plight of the African woman, 'othering,' gender, or what not. The resilience of the African woman also comes to the fore in Atta's writing.

The Hundred Wells of Salaga: a synopsis

A novel that makes a riveting read, *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* by Ghanaian fiction writer Ayesha Harruna came out in 2018. The novel is set in pre-colonial Ghana against the background of internecine warfare coupled with British and German-driven colonialism. The narrative is told from the point of view of two young women of different social background, but whose commonality, lo and behold, lies in their running the gauntlet of patriarchal masculinity with its attendant sexual brutality. The straightjacket of patriarchy compels them to toe men's line. The daughter of a slave holding king, Wurche is brought up to play second fiddle to her male brothers, to wit Dramani and Suleimana. That notwithstanding, she bends over backwards to ride above patriarchal strictures as she seeks to have a say in the management of the kingdom in a way that might bolster up her father's standing in the slave trade. What really marks her off from Aminah is the latter's gruesome first-hand experience of slavery along with her siblings, in the aftermath of raiders setting their house on fire. The two women's paths cross half-way through the narrative when Wurche, rather against her better judgement, relieves Aminah from the clutches of a cut-throat slave owner, only to use her as a slave of sorts. Be that as it may, Aminah eventually wins freedom thanks to Wurche.

1. Female Slavery and its Multifaceted Human Toll

Iyesha Harruna Atta's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* doubtless holds a mirror to the heavy toll exacted by slavery, not least in pre-colonial Africa. The two women from whose point of view the story is told, to wit Wurche and Aminah, have in their separate ways been on the

receiving end of the multifaceted ravages of slavery. Aminah has experienced slavery first-hand, whereas Wurche resists helplessly being sucked into it. The straightjacket of patriarchy in pre-colonial Africa helps capture the earth-watering scope of slavery. The character of Aminah exemplifies no end the gender hue of the inhuman practice of slavery. Quite unexpectedly, she alongside her twin sisters Husseina and Hassana as well as her kid brother Issa were forced out of their family home by a bunch of horsemen who, in their nefarious hunt for women slaves, burned their village to the ground before eloping with their human booty. According to the narrator, the horsemen broke into the Sahada household and,

herded the children outside, where several other horsemen were herding people out of their homes. They rounded up every one and roped them, one to the other, at the waist, mixing up men, women, girls, boys. It didn't matter. Families were torn apart, tied up with other families. (50)

It bears stressing that men made up only a fractional number of the group of captives (65). Anyway, this gruesome event turns out to be a game changer in the peaceable life that Aminata has been living in her father's house, along with her mother and her co-wife. Indeed, Aminah's life becomes a harrowing tale of woes hallmarked by a gruelling walk through a thick forest and water crossing, physical manhandling cum sexual abuse. During her long, arduous journey to Wofa Sarpong's household – a slave owner -, Amanah got separated from one of her twin sisters, namely Husseina, and lost her kid brother Issa. Little wonder she was overwhelmed with feelings of heartache and nostalgia. Amanah's plight at the hands of the horsemen and Wofa Sarpong vindicates Claire Robertson's submission that "*most slaves kept in Africa were women primarily because of their high value for commodity production and domestic labor and secondarily for their biological reproductive function*" (66). The moment she is sold into slavery along with her kid sister Hassana, Aminah serves as a mistress of sorts for Wofa Sarpong as well as a domestic worker. The narrator recounts that the slave owner Sarpong visits Aminah's room every night and stays there until the wee hours of the morning. Although he stopped short of penetrating Aminah – He "*kept Aminah's virginity intact*" (86), the fact remains that she was bruised big time. According to the narrator, the physical and psychological toll exacted on Aminah as a result of the sexual battery is downright sobering:

When he'd get up to leave, her legs would grow heavy, her heart sore. She was always too ashamed to move? She would lie there, a part of her, of all things, grateful. That he didn't take his act beyond her mouth meant that if she ever got back to Botu, she wouldn't be a ruined woman. (87)

The unconscionable hanky-panky of Wofa Sarpong doubtless packs a punch, so that Aminah takes it upon herself to “hide Hassana from that shameful thing he was doing to her” (87). Her no-nonsense call to shield Hassana from the indignities of Sarpong says a mouthful. The only saving grace that she finds in her nasty experience lies in lack of penetration by Sarpong. Sexual battery and rape come with the territory of enslavement. They adversely affect the psyche of the victim. Women slaves go through trauma as a backwash effect of sexual assault. Cathy Caruth, a prominent pundit on trauma theory, points out that “in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not on the body but on the mind” (3). In the same breath, she offers this caveat that,

the wound of the mind – the breach of mind in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (3-4)

In the light of the foregoing, the fallout from a trauma exposure are far-reaching, and may be life-long. Trauma encounter defies being suppressed from consciousness as it shatters every inch the victim’s sense of time and space through its manifold re-enactments². Harking back to the world of *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, Aminah finds it next to impossible to draw a line under the traumatic experience of the horsemen’s wantonly horrific orgy of rampage that has killed Na, viz. her mum. If anything, she has a guilty conscience about her failure to rescue her mother when the invaders overran their village. Aminah vindicates Caruth’s contention that “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Pretty much throughout the narrative, Aminah beats herself up. Come to think of it, Aminah has undergone a double trauma encounter. Firstly, she is enslaved through no fault of her own, and used by her master as a sexual object. Secondly, she has lost loved ones at close quarters from arson by raiding horsemen.

² I won’t expand overly upon the issue of trauma. Rather, I’ll limit myself to referring the reader to my paper “The Myth of the ‘Rainbow Nation’: Xenophobia, Sexual Violence, and Racial Tensions in Kopano Matlwa’s *Period Pain*” published in *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences (IJELS)*. Also, I have dealt with the manifold toll of trauma exposure in my article “Chris Abani’s *Song for Night* and the Battlefield Trauma of Child Soldiers” published in *International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies (IJAAS)*.

The gendered nature of the practice of slavery in pre-colonial Africa and in the trans-Atlantic slave as well is writ large in the woes of women and girls whose only wrong is their female status. The double function of the slave woman, namely domestic labour and sexual, gives gruesome insights into the reasons underpinning the difference in treatment between men and women in slavery. The female body is both a source of power and wealth for the slaving man. In a stunning article entitled "Trafficking, Gender and Slavery: Past and Present," the American scholar of Jamaican descent Orlando Patterson posits that one of the key hallmarks of slavery is its gendered edge. Then he elaborates upon the unflattering status of slave women as mere sexual ciphers: He writes:

An important feature of historical slavery which...is of great relevance to the situation today, is the gendered nature of slavery and the centrality of the body in the slave relation. Throughout the ages of slavery, women were not only the main and preferred source of slaves in most slave-holding societies, but the condition of non-slave women provided the psychological, socio-economic, legal, and physical model of enslavement. In numerous societies women were ready substitutes for non-slave women, in labour and in bed. (3)

The practice of enslavement is, to quote Patterson, a horrendous form of exploitation that brings out the worst in humanity. The body which is supposed to stand for womandom and love morphs into an object of hate cum exploitation of any ilk. In slavery, what is most sacred in a woman is devalued, defiled for the sake of male gratification. Womanly purity, it bears stressing, cannot stand up to the whimsical wants of patriarchal masculinity the dead hand of which does not allow women breathing space in a slaving society. The cruelty of slavery is inscribed in the title of the novel at hand. There is more to the meaning of the novel than meets the eye. Slavers, including the Europeans, are vying to control Salaga in that it is viewed as the hub of the slave trade in pre-colonial Ghana. When Etuto tries to twist her daughter's arm in favour of accepting the alliance with the Europeans³, he puts forward two arguments, namely that "*they protect us against the Asante first and foremost, then the French, who also like to take Salaga.*" In the same breath, he adds a rider: "*It's all about control, Wurche. Whoever has control of Salaga is most powerful*" (135). Speaking of the

³ Ayesha Harruna highlights in her novel the astounding implication of Africans in the enslavement of their own brothers and sisters. But that facet of the novel falls outside the ambit of the paper. Having said that, I plan on authoring a research article African collaboration in the mediation of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the foreseeable future.

word ‘Wells,’ it carries a symbolic meaning rooted in inhumanity that, lo and behold, carries a tinge of empathy. In reply to Aminah’s question, “*Why are there so many wells here [Salaga],*” Wurche supplies a sobering answer: “*They were built to wash slaves after long journeys*” (212). Death, beating, sleep and water deprivation would inter alia dot those journeys. Back in the day, slaves, mostly women, were severely restricted in their movements in a bid to prevent them taking to their heels. The indignity of enslavement reaches fever pitch when the slaves feel compelled to publicly relieve themselves. Actually, there is nothing ennobling, much less dignified in the slave condition. Against this background, any agency by slaves geared towards assuaging the tedium cum mitigating the harshness of their existence is assuredly doomed to come to grief. As the narrator describes:

The captives tried to function as one. They urinated and emptied their bowels at the same time, under watchful eyes. When they were given food, they made sure everyone got at least a small piece. But it was impossible to stay united in such conditions. Some of them were in more pain than others. (67)

In *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*, Wurche is sort of the mirror image of Aminah. As stated previously, she is unwittingly caught in the mires of a slaving business. Also, despite her well-meaning efforts to practise conscience through her half-hearted support of slavery, she, quite unexpectedly, wraps up buying Aminah as a slave. (I’ll elaborate upon that later on.) Meanwhile, it’s noteworthy that Wurche is exercised no end by the double whammy of the straightjacket of patriarchy and the downsides of the slave trade. Plainly, she does not take male dominance in her stride. Instead, she adamantly demands that she be put on an equal footing with her brothers, Dramani and Sulemana. Like every woman living in a male-dominated world, Wurche is deprived of a say when it comes to choosing a significant other. Witness how the narrator describes her quandary:

Wurche didn’t want to lose her family, but were certain they would soon insist on her getting married. What would happen if she let them have their way, but only on the condition that she was allowed to choose? The general rule is that royals married royals. What if she told them she’d chosen someone like Moro? A commoner. (17)

In the African context patriarchy rules the roost; so, womanhood is achieved through marriage and motherhood⁴. The lead characters of Ayesha Harruna feel the heat to go down

⁴ For more perspectives on the significance of marriage and motherhood in the African context, read my article “The Delights of Motherhood vs. the Anguish of Barrenness: An African Womanist Interpretation of *The Secret*”

the path of marriage. For reasons germane to beefing up male control, and to enhancing the yield from slavery, the female body is unabashedly trampled upon. Aminah and Wurche have a commonality, namely that they do not want to get coerced into marriage. Indeed, marriage, that is forced marriage, is akin to being subjected to slavery as forced marriage victims are at the tender mercies of men who do not have it in them to recognise the humanity in their victims. The construction of the body of the woman as a locus of control, and self-aggrandisement for men means that their rights and lacks as well as aspirations for self-actualization take a backseat to androcentric attitudes. Wurche is a case in point: she eventually feels compelled to ditch her crush Moro, only to marry Adnan with an eye towards to helping her father win a succession tussle. Etuto, Wurche's father, sells a winning spiel to his daughter:

Our line has been skipped for too many generations now, and when our kingdom was established, our great founder, Namba, left Kpembe to his three sons: Kanyase, Lepo, and Singbung. One was supposed to inherit the skin, then the next, then the third. Why then have two taken over and left out one? Why have we been sidelined? (56)

Despite the fact that she beats herself up on being denied the privilege to marry the man she loves, Wurche ends up caving in to her dad's pressure. Addressing him when her mind is ultimately made up, she said meltingly, "*Etuto, I am entering this marriage for you*" (58). (Thanks to the alliance with the Dagbon sealed through the union between Wurche and Adnan, the Gonjas managed to carry the day.) As regards Aminah, she nearly froze when Obado came to Baba's house, saying, "*Issa-Na's uncle would like to ask for Aminah's hand in marriage*" (46). In a bid to get the family on board, he emphasizes the necessity "*to work in groups,*" or else "*we'll be vulnerable*" (47). Aminah owes her escape from the clutches of early marriage to her mother who devises a plot to let her unwilling daughter off the hook. Talking to Aminah, she said:

"Don't do anything," Na said. "I will talk to him and tell him it's in our nature to think things through and not rush to a decision. In a fortnight, I'll send Issa-Na to bring him back and when he comes back we'll be so unreasonable with our demands, he'll think twice about his request." (48)

It would not be so much of an exaggeration to make the contention that marriage and slavery interlock to reduce women to the obnoxious status of ciphers in the hands of men. Understandably, women are treasured up in a slaving context due inter alia to their sexuality cum labour power. To be sure, the gendered structure of slavery did not occur in a vacuum. It is rather an offshoot of a larger system of exploitation that feeds on stereotypical images of women as a weak and undeserving bunch. The dyadic notion of patriarchy and capitalism have this much in common: they ruthlessly work against people who are already left out in the cold owing to sexism, class or race. Zilla Eisenstein appositely uses the term ‘capitalist patriarchy’ to better foreground “*the existing mutual dependence of the capitalist class structure and male supremacy*” (196). Meena Gopal Sabala sees eye to eye with Eisenstein as she, in a powerful article, points to patriarchy and capitalism as the main drivers of male subjugation of women. She writes: “*The labouring female body has never gained importance because women’s labour has been persistently devalued, be it within the home or outside, as domestic/sexual worker, as productive labour within the household or agricultural and other formal and informal labour*” (44). The power of patriarchy and capitalism represents a real albatross around women’s drive towards cutting loose from the shackles of sex and economy-based oppression. Just as capitalism cashes in on the labour of the worker, so is patriarchy a drag on women’s progress.

Aminah forms part of a bunch of hapless women who put a human face on the heavy toll exacted by female slavery. They exemplify the objectification of women and the commodification of their labour. In *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* women are portrayed as bearing the brunt of slavery because of their sex and, perhaps more significantly, the weight of patriarchy. Wurche has accepted to marry Adnan only to carry favour with her father, and help her people out of a quandary. Little wonder that her marriage to Adnan under duress comes to haunt her every step of the way. She makes a clean breast of her marriage sorrows in one-on-one with her teacher Jaji: “*I am suffocating, Jaji. If I stay in this marriage, I’ll lose my mind*” (139). When asked to elaborate upon the bind she is in, she provides a cast-iron reason: “*It’s simple: there is no love between us. Or maybe it’s me. I don’t like him and I don’t think I can grow to love him*” (139). Her submission that “*I prefer that he divorce me*” (140) says it all. Deep down, she feels that her call to tie the knot with Adnan was a

misbegotten one. But in fairness to her, it should be emphasized that there was no way that she could flout scot-free the pressing demands of patriarchy. Her reticence to ask for a divorce is grounded in patriarchy-induced fear: *"I married him to strengthen our alliance with Dagbon. My father wants to do everything to keep that link as tight as possible. If I divorce him, I'll have to leave Kpembe and Salaga and hide in a well"* (140). Wurche is then in a trap out of which she has her work out extricating due to fear of blowback with unintended consequences. There is no emphasizing enough that patriarchy feeds on women's body, and sexuality which is, according to Pamela Abbott et al., *"experienced and expressed within relations of power and exchange and what we think of as sexual varies historically and culturally as well as in different social contexts"* (198). American scholar and activist Catherine A. MacKinnon is in lockstep with Abbott et al. as she contends that sexuality is crucial to teasing out the workings of gender. She writes that,

sexuality is gendered as gender is sexualized. Male and female are created through the eroticisation of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other. This is the social meaning of sex and the distinctively feminist account of gender inequality. ... The feminist theory of knowledge is inextricable from the feminist critique of power because the male point of view forces itself upon the world as its way of apprehending it. (635-6)

Male control of female sexuality is a symbol of power, which is exercised at full throttle to keep women down, or rather keep them forever subservient to men. The subjugation of women by patriarchal masculinity (which packed a real punch during slavery) belies the conventional wisdom that power is restricted to the field of politics. Power⁵ also betrays itself

⁵ The concept of Power is a slippery one as it has spawned a huge amount of controversy and definitional paradigms. So it would be outside the scope of this investigation project to run through all the body of literature about the meaning and workings of power. But, due to the fact that it is key to understanding the subservient status of women to men, I deem it important and relevant to the issue at hand to bring in some perspectives in regard to power. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English first takes power to mean *"The ability or right to control people or events"* (Sixth Printing). This definition, it bears stressing, does not foreground any evil intentionality of the part of he who wields power. The ability or right to control does not imply, not by a long shot, a desire to harm or subject to one's will. The relational prong of power is highlighted in Robert Dahl's definition: *"My intuitive idea of power... is something like this: A has power over B to the extent that A can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do"* (203-203). The phrase 'get B to do' might give the impression that there is no constraint involved, that is, it does not carry any undertone of negativity. Conversely, in Nelson Polsby's view of power, negativity shows. He writes that, *"one can conceive of 'power' – 'influence' and 'control' are serviceable synonyms – as the capacity of one actor to do something affecting another actor, which changes the probable pattern of specified future events. This can be envisaged most easily in decision-making"* (Qtd. In Lukes 17). Nelson Polsby locates the significance of power in decision-making process. John Hallway emphasizes capability capacity, saying, *"Power, in the first, is simply: can-ness, capacity to do, the ability to do something"* (12). Interestingly, the vexed issue of power was taken to new heights in terms of

in social relations. Nowhere does its wreak more of its harrowing havoc than in slavery where an actor, for race or economy-based grounds, bends another actor to his will. Slavery not least in pre-colonial Africa had, as already noted, a gendered edge. Ayesha Harruna's *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* offers penetrating sidelights on how the juggernaut of patriarchal masculinity wields its unwarranted might over women for its own self-serving ends. Aminah, her grandma Eeyah, her mother Na, her twin sisters Hassana and Husseina, an old woman whose name is not mentioned in the narrative, and Khadija have run the searing gauntlet of enslavement and its attendant dehumanization at the hands of slavers. The subjectivity of women such as Aminah and Khadija as well as the aforementioned old woman is subsumed in chattel slavery. The narrator recounts (119-120) with gruesome detail, how Aminah was framed up, causing Wofa Sarpong to do away with her through selling. Aminah's case betokens the beastliness associated with chattel slavery, the immorality of which is all the more excruciating as women are involved. When Wofa Sarpong and Aminah arrived in Salaga, they carted off. But, Aminah, came near to freezing upon seeing the mien of her would-be buyer - shades of her past (124). Deserving elaboration is that the buyer, acting on behalf of someone else, registered his bafflement the moment he met Aminah, and, quite unexpectedly, could not help but ask Wofa Sarpong, "Why are you selling such a precious gem?" (125). Wofa's comeback is mind-boggling: "Long story. I need the money" (125).

scholarly substance with the introduction in the body of literature of two concepts: 'power to' and 'power over,' whose brainchild is John Hallway. Key to understanding this dyadic notion is the positivity that characterizes 'power to' and the negativity that hallmarks 'power over.' 'Power to' points to "something good: I feel powerful, I feel good" (12). Hallway is at pains to posit that 'power to', unlike 'power over,' is anchored on sociality, namely that interpersonal relationship gives it meaning and relevance: "Power to is never individual: it is always social. It cannot be thought of as existing in some pure, unsullied state, for its existence will always be part of the way in which sociality is organized" (12). In the same breath, the Irish-born sociologist and philosopher of Marxist bent makes the contention that when 'power to' is forfended, precluded from its praxis, then its opposite raises its ugly head, to wit 'power over,' the end game of which is to hamper agency: "It is when the social flow of doing is fractured that power-to is transformed into its opposite, power-over. The social flow is fractured when doing itself is broken. Doing-as-projection-beyond is broken when some people arrogate to themselves the projection-beyond -conception) of the doing and command others to execute what they have commanded. Doing is broken as the 'powerful' conceive but do not execute, while the others execute but do not conceive" (12-13). Hallway's insightful perspectives on Power go a long way towards helping grasp the subjugation of women and the praxis of feminist movements. That is, feminism (s) provides a textbook example of 'power to,' namely that it is a social and political movement geared towards righting the wanton wrongs meted out to women on sexist and patriarchal grounds. Conversely, female slavery with its attendant human toll exemplifies 'power over' as control and influence are exercised with the utmost ferocity over women to make them toe the line. Slavery as 'one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination' (Patterson 1) negates the humanity in its victims, and so deprives them of any say as to how they want to handle their lives.

When you come to think of it, what lurks behind Wofa Sarpong's selling of Aminah is the latter's adamant refusal to serve as a whore for both father and son even though she is in clutches of slavery. Even while in enslavement, one can remain on moral high ground. The sexual abuse of slave women by master and son is historically documented.

2. Uplifting Pushback through Sisterhood

The slave powerlessly got bumped from buyer to buyer with no hope of seeing the light at the end of a bleakly dark tunnel. Men and women were enslaved both in pre-colonial Africa and during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Granted. However, women were, arguably, on the receiving end of even harsher strictures than men due to their biology. For one thing, their female status made them easy game for the most disgusting of sexual objectification. On top of their role commensurate with their womanhood, female slaves of black extraction were conspicuous by their unfailing courage in field work. Aminah's ordeals at the hands of Maigida speak volumes about the lot of female slaves:

Instead of heading to his building, they stopped at the open market just before it. He took Aminah to a tree, shackled her ankles, and pointed to a large stone.

"Please," Amina begged. Please, clothe me. Please, not this⁶. He said nothing. ... She bent her head and saw her breasts, her black bushy triangle. This was the most exposed she'd felt since her exile from Botu.

She slunk to the ground, wrapped her hands around her legs and buried her head in the pocket between her knees. When will this end, she wanted to scream. (132)

Aminah's nakedness in the public eye⁷, her horrendous humiliation doubtless conveys a withering indictment of the immorality of slavery, not least female slavery. (This obnoxious scene, as we'll see later, represents a game changer in the narrative as it paves the way for Aminah's relief from the clutches of cut-throat male slavers.) Patriarchal masculinity has

⁶ Italicized in the book; so, it is I who underline.

⁷ The fact of exposing slave women publicly was, if historical accounts are anything to go by, a commonplace in Africa and America during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Female slaves were often forced into nakedness so that potential buyers could have an idea of inter alia their sexual allure as it factored into the process of buying. In a most powerful article entitled "Slavery, Sex, and Dehumanization," The late David Brion Davis, a prominent American cultural historian and a pundit on slavery, highlights this phenomenon. He writes that, "during slave auctions, women's bodies were routinely exposed and examined to determine their capacity for childbearing. And the sight of naked slave women was clearly arousing for white males, especially in a era when white women could be provocative just by lifting a skirt slightly above an ankle" (53). All this goes to show yet again how women's bodies are trivialized for self-serving ends. There is more to the deployment of sexuality in a slaving context than sheer pornography.

eroticized male dominance of women to animalistic heights. It sucks that what is most sacred in a woman's body is trivialized, exposed for everyone to see. Maigida may have acted out of spite and despondency, but his sick behaviour is suggestive of a mind-set anchored on a warped perception of the womanly body as nothing more than a plaything thanks to which male stranglehold on female is shored. Women's bodies can be a valuable asset for them. By the same token they can be, sad to say, an albatross around their neck. In a potent book, American philosopher, activist, scholar, all rolled into one, Angela Davis posits that the lives of black women under slavery were distinctly harrowing. She writes that,

women suffered in different ways as well, for they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbarous mistreatment that could only be inflicted on women. Expedience governed the slaveholders' posture towards female slaves: when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect, as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles. (9)

The airily paternalistic demeanour of slavers towards female slaves beggars belief. No stone is left unturned to make them internalize their subservient status to men. The lop-sided dynamics that govern man/woman relationship in a non-slaving society is pretty much the same that prevail in a slaving society. That is, the praxis of patriarchal masculinity is brazenly geared towards objectifying women through an unabashed exploitation of their sexuality, and their labour. Women are brainwashed through language and actions into internalizing their inferior status to men as the world of *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* clearly shows. The sanctity of human life underpinned by the reason with which any human being is endowed implies that they have no monetary worth. But the hallmark of slavery is that it debunks this lofty ideal since it stands as a practice that allows the sale of human beings like pack animals, and their labour exploitation. When Aminah asks Maigida, "When will I leave?" he answered unashamedly: "When your buyer returns" (131). Aminah teeters on the brink of snapping as she can't get her head around how she has found herself overnight in the throes of slavery. The 'unfreedom' of the slave, in this case Aminah, is a gruesome reminder of man's capacity for evil.

The gendered nature of slavery makes it even more unpalatable. The sexist-driven enslavement of women sets the stage for them to be sold into marriage or to help men get out of a tight spot. Khadija's story is telling. As she confides to Aminah: "Three years ago my

father gave me up to pay a debt. It was fine, because it was to a friend of his, and I knew his children” (127). The internalization of their supposed nonentity status means that women are like playthings in the hands of men. Dishonour, it bears stressing, is one of the distinctive features of the slave condition. In the case of female slaves, they are doubly dishonoured: from a sexual and labour perspective. Both male and female slaves lack what nineteenth-century sophisticated thinker Arthur Schopenhauer calls ‘civic honour’ which, in his estimation, “*consists in the assumption that we shall pay unconditional respect to the rights of others, and, therefore, never use any unjust or unlawful means of getting what we want*” (55-56). The ‘natal alienation’ that Orlando Patterson describes as being characteristic of the slave brings about his or her dishonour.

Emphatically, Ayesha Harruna highlights in *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* the human toll of female slavery. The novel is peopled with women who experience the double yoke of patriarchal masculinity and the gendered-edge of slavery. There is, nonetheless, a silver lining to their suffering, which is that some of them do not take their lot in their strides. Actually, they put up pushback against the injustice they are wantonly subjected to on the grounds of their biology. Rather than wallow helplessly in low self-regard, some of Ayesha Harruna’s female characters, despite the odds stacked against them, manage to exercise ‘power to’ against ‘power over’, namely that they strive flat out to call time on their predicament. Slavery and patriarchy are systems of power that can only be dismantled by those who are on the receiving end of it. Aminah, for example, is conspicuous by her discourse against power, which bears testimony. As hinted at earlier, Wofa Sarpong did away with her grieving inwardly. For, in Wofa’s house Aminah worked hard, and were respectful (121). Hence Sarpong’s admission that “*I was going to marry you*” (121) indicates that Aminah was a slave out of the common run. A marriage between a master and his slave would be potentially beneficial to both. The master would ramp up his slave population whereas the slave woman would get Anyway, Wofa Sarpong felt compelled to sell her to another slaver on the trumped-up charge that she bit his son Kwesi and then wanted to run away. But in actual fact, the real backstory to Aminah’s forced departure from Wofa’s house lies her dogged refusal to serve as sexual object for father and son. During the long, gruelling journey from the village to Salaga, slave women remained unresponsive to Wofa Sarpong’s

question as why she bit his eldest son, and wanted to run away. Then she decided to be cruel to be kind, and told Wofa to his face, *"I wasn't running away. Your son wanted to finish what you started"* (126). Aminah states that the emperor has no clothes, which is an act of conspicuous courage that deserves commending. By spurning sexual dalliance with Kwesi, Aminah dealt a psychological and physical blow to the slave master. Come to think of it, the rationale behind master's sexual designs on his female slave is to display domination and power. The agency of the slave woman with an eye towards keeping at bay sexual exploitation can be read not only as an act of resistance but also, more importantly, a roundabout way of regaining her lost honour. Slaves could rebel in many ways against the multifaceted violence to which they were subjected on a daily basis. As Paul Lovejoy states:

the violence inherent in slavery affected the psychology of the slaves. The knowledge of the horrors of enslavement and the fear of arbitrary action produced in slaves both a psychology of servility and the potential for rebellion. This dual personality related to the coercion of the institution, for memory, observation served as effective methods of maintaining an atmosphere in which violence always lurked in the background. (7)

Aminah's stubborn refusal to tie the knot with *"A wrinkled old man [who] came to greet my family just before I got kidnapped"* (129) is a measure of her rebellious bent at the same time that it reflects a mind-set geared towards challenging the straightjacket of patriarchal masculinity. Speaking of Wurche, she has not experienced in the flesh the throes of slavery as Aminah has. Yet she, arguably, suffers in some regards its psychological backwash effects. She is endowed with a psychological make-up that makes her castigate, when push comes to shove, the bottlenecks of women in a highly patriarchal society. Her extramarital affairs that resulted in out-of-wedlock kids partake of a well-meaning drive against the inhumanity of enslavement. Wurche drags her unwilling involvement in 'owning people' as a burden. Her confession to Adnan, *"After we got married, I lay with another man"* (165) underscores her pricks of conscience. Similarly, she is possessed of a moral compass thanks to which she is privy to the nature of slavery as a moral outrage. The reader learns from the narrator that *"from spending time with Moro, the whole idea of slavery had grown questionable to her and, yet, in a heartbeat, without pausing, she'd offered to buy someone"* (143). As it happens, that someone is Aminah. Wurche saves Aminah from the jaws of slavery of the blackest dye. Being dismayed at Aminah's lot at the hands of Maigida. Wurche takes it upon herself to buy

Aminah at 300 cowries. As hinted at previously, Maigida the landlord bought Aminah from Wofa Sarpong on behalf of Moro. But the latter having reneged on his promise to return from Kete-Kratchi in three days' time to retrieve Aminah, Maigida started feeling the pinch of having to provide for the slave woman: "*It's day seven. I could make a lot of money selling her to someone else. I am a good man, but my patience is wearing thin*" (142). Wurche sort of inherited Aminah against her better judgment. As it turns out, Aminah became a tower of strength to her and her son Wumpini:

She wasn't proud of having bought Aminah, especially at a time when she'd been wrestling with the concept of owning people. Nor was she proud of threatening to send Aminah south. But mostly, she was unsettled by the sudden thought of life without Aminah. Aminah anchored her. For one, the girl took Wumpini off her hands. But also, when Aminah was around, she felt safety and peace and something more she wanted to keep buried. (185-6).

When Moro comes to reclaim Aminah, Wurche digs in her heels. Arguably, she does not talk a good game about the obnoxiousness of slavery. Far from it. Ordering Aminah about is psychologically draining for her as, deep down, slavery is anathema to her. Her exercise of 'power over' vis-à-vis Aminah is not calculated to feed on slavery. Rather, her agency reflects an anti-slavery bent. Aminah – whose "*life had been treated as if she were no different from cattle or kola nut*" (225) - may dance attendance on Wurche, yet the latter is somewhat the lesser of two evils. Actually, her only hope of winning freedom lies with Wurche whose feeling of kinship with the slave woman seems for real. Deserving elaboration is that an anti-slavery drive is inscribed in Wurche's attitude towards Aminah. Wurche has demonstrated that the Holy Grail of liberation from patriarchal tyranny cum the yoke of female slavery can be mediated through sisterhood. After the 'acquisition' of Aminah, Wurche's praxis became geared towards salving her conscience - that is, to redeem her half-hearted involvement in the practice of slavery. Knowing full well that, as Bell Hooks states, "*Solidarity strengthens resistance struggle*" (127), Wurche tries to weave her own yearning for freedom from patriarchal shackles into that of Aminah, whom she calls my '*quiet companion*' (195). Similarly, Aminah acknowledges that Wurche also anchors her. If anything, she regards her as family: "*Sister will be waiting for us,*" she said to Wumpini as she pries her from Helmut's grasp (203). By setting Aminah free - "*Aminah, you're free...I should have said told you this a long time ago*" (224) -, Wurche gives proof of her

humanness. More to the point, she registers the fact that enslavement did not underpin her ‘acquisition’ of the slave woman but rather out of empathy and common oppression rooted in patriarchal ideology.

In the final analysis, suffice it to say that *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* holds a mirror to the crass inhumanity of the gendered nature of slavery. Aminah and other women epitomize the human face of a sexist-based ideology the reaches of which extend into the practice of slavery. Actually, the investigation project reveals that female slavery was mediated by the double yoke of patriarchal masculinity and a wanton negation of the negation in the other for self-serving ends. The silver lining to *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* lies in the fact that, apart from the daily woes that dot the lives of enslaved women and men, it foregrounds sisterhood as an effective way out of the straightjacket of male dominance. In this regard, Wurche’s buying of Aminah, in spite of its blatantly moral ignominy, can be read as an uplifting act of sisterhood that ultimately culminates in the freedom of the slave woman. In the world of *The Hundred Wells of Salaga* women, against all expectations, exercise ‘power to’ as they fight with every fibre of their being to throw off the shackles of gender-based oppression.

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