

Changing the Single Story: Narrating Women and Ethno-Religious Conflict in E.E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*

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Abstract

The representations and portrayals of women in literary productions on war, ethno-religious conflicts, genocide and violent killings have asserted the recurring theme of female victimhood. There is the need to continue the conversations that challenge the 'single story' of female victimhood and perspectivise women as resilient and active agents in subverting normative and oppressive structures in times of conflict in fictional narratives forms the focus of the present study. Using Womanism as theoretical framework, I lay emphasis on women's roles and their representations in E.E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*. These representations are deployed to discuss the significant responsibilities of women and the performances of social roles as mothers and wives in opposition to the performance of masculinity in times of violence and conflicts. Through these, I centre women as important stakeholders and potential social agents. I also highlight the need to revisit the performance of gender roles in conflict and question what really empowers women. Following from the analysis of *Sterile Sky*, I identify the characterisations of women who rally round and help their family in times of crisis, as empowering. However, I identify this centering as weakened through the recourse to patriarchal expectations which still inhibit their agentic performance and individuality.

Keywords: Empowerment; Gender Roles; Women Agency; Ethno-Religious Conflicts; Resilience.

Introduction

Marion Pape in "Nigerian War Literature by Women: From Civil War to Gender War" claims that women are excluded in discourses on war and their experiences unacknowledged. She asserts "[W]hether they wanted it or not, women have always been involved in wars, actively in many different roles, passively as victims of violence, hunger, and displacement – yet, in the representation of wars they have remained largely 'invisible'" (Pape 231). Indeed, the performance of gender during times of conflict has been studied by different scholars within different contexts and from diverse perspectives (Dietrich and Quain 2014; Kaufman and Williams 2014). The far-reaching assertion from these studies is that women are placed at a disadvantage. This is especially valid as a result of sexual violence meted to women and girls during such unfortunate circumstances and uncertain times. Kaufman and Williams posit that women's struggles and roles are increased in times of conflict and that women are active agents in their response to conflict and in their shaping of political and historical processes. Their arguments are in line with the claims of this present study in its emphasis on women's struggles with patriarchy and their roles before, during, and after times of conflict. However for the two scholars viewing women this way: as peace builders and reconciliatory agents; volunteers or forced combatants; nurses and home keepers; whose contributions and impacts are felt during

and after times of violent conflict presuppose that women's voices are absent or disregarded before times of conflict. For Brendon Nicholls, "this gender-political strategy situates women outside of history, denying them sites of articulation and occasions for political community" (77).

Existing studies on violent conflicts and war in Nigeria (Amadiume 1984; Oluwaniyi 2019; Ola 2020) show that women writers on the Nigerian civil war portrayed women as deeply involved in the war, supporting the men:

Women fed and sustained the economy of Biafra through 'attack' trade, which involved market trips through the enemy front lines. Women formed a strong core of the militia, task forces etc., while mothers became the cohesive force in a shifting, diminishing people who were slowly losing what they saw as a war of survival (Amadiume, 1839)

This secondary role as seen in the above excerpt affirms that men are the main perpetrators of ethno-religious crises, war and other violent acts that are tied to ideologies while women keep the home front, contributing in roles decided for them. The domestication of gender roles during and post- conflict is the focus of this research. It however places emphasis on the social changes that come with times of violent conflict and how women are placed in spaces of power and influence as decision makers in the family in times of ethno-religious conflict. This perceptivisation frames married women as partners in the home and active agents in deciding for herself and her children. Drawing insights from Womanism, a theory that gives African writers the "power to create new realities; to represent male-female relationships and the role of women as they have been in the past and might be in the future: women as neither victors nor victims but partners in the struggle" (Davies 86), the study examines how Sule's portrayal of women agency is framed as reliant on the contributions of men. Womanism promotes the ideology that men and women, in their gender roles are equal and complementary and that, in their performance of their gender roles under patriarchy, there is no superior or inferior role. This way of approaching gender roles is echoed by Charles Nnolim in his argument for a theory that will not destabilise the patriarchal order like feminism is wont to do. He says that there should be:

reconciliation, not separation; convergence, not divergence; love, not hatred; affection, not mere passion; a pooling together of resources, not a scattering; a building together, not destruction of the latent love between the sexes; an establishment of the family under patriarchy, not advocacy for a new arrangement (138)

This study reads Sule's *Sterile Sky* within this framework to examine the performance of gender roles in conflict; discuss how beneficial the performance of increased gender roles is to women; and, make submissions on what is really empowering to women.

Postcolonial Nigeria, beleaguered by ethno-religious conflicts, wars, targeted killings and genocides, has a body of fictional works dedicated to bear witness and document how these

happenings are influenced by power brokers and the impact of these happenings on the nation state. From Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Chinua Achebe's *There Was A Country* to Shehu Sani's *When Clerics Kill* and Uwem Akpan's *Say You're One of Them*, there are discussions on Nigeria's struggles to survive as a nation state and the plights of victims characterized as traumatic. E.E. Sule's *The Sterile Sky* is about Murtala and his family during a violent ethno-religious conflict in Kano. While narrating Murtala's coming of age story and the struggles of the young protagonist with finding himself in a world in disarray, Sule writes the story of Murtala's mother, known as Mama, and her strength during and after the violent conflict. In Sule's novel, there is the reenactment of the violent riot that happened in Kano as a result of the German Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke's planned visit and crusade. Kano, a city in the Northern part of Nigeria, is known to be largely dominated by Muslims. Similar to the mantra of the missionaries before him, the late evangelist came with the salvation and supremacy story of a loving savior. With Bonnke recording a large number of converts in Ilorin and Kaduna, cities with a large number Muslims, other Northern cities especially Kano felt threatened. This led to the carnage witnessed in Kano and which was rendered in Sule's text.

***Sterile Sky* and the Possibilities of Empowering Women in Conflict**

Critical writings on Sule's novel have focused on the depiction of the issues of ethnicity, religious fundamentalism and violence. The levels and severity of violence in *Sterile Sky* is the interest of Ahmad Kofa Babajo and Isaac Alkali (2021). The study places emphasis on the complicity of the government in creating enabling conditions for the ethnic and religious violence that plagues the country. Lola Akande (2021), also focuses on the author's engagement and portrayal of violent killings and what ethno-religious crises portend for the society and the Nigerian nation state at large. However, it is necessary to discuss the centering of women as fire brigadiers in works like Sule's. The gender landscape of Sule's work is an important topic for examination as it will highlight the writer's perception of the performance of gender roles in conflict situations as well as his framing of the place of women in marriage and their agency as individuals. In Nigeria, the rights of women are still debatable and the few women in positions of leadership struggle to make their voices heard. Male legislators who are in the majority, using the Bible, Quran, the Nigerian constitution and other traditional scripting, voted down the bill for Gender and Equal Opportunity once again in 2021. The bill which was first sponsored by a female legislator in 2015 sought to:

guarantee the rights of women to equal opportunities in employment, equal rights to inheritance for both male and female children; equal rights for women in marriage and divorce, equal access to education, property/land ownership and inheritance. It also seeks to protect the rights of widows; guarantee appropriate measures against gender discrimination in political and public life and prohibit violence against women¹.

¹ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/500980-again-gender-equality-bill-suffers-setback-at-senate.html>

However, as women rights are not expected to be explicit and are usually fraught with ambiguous interpretations and because as women's agency is couched within the limits and allowance of men, Nigeria lawmakers are yet to fully define the rights of the women in the country. While women are still positioned as subservient and victims of victimization in the home and public places in Nigeria, traditional Hausa-Fulani societies, where Sule's work is set, are particularly known for placing women in a disadvantaged position and the pronounced wrongs to their rights are not always questioned especially as the patriarchal nature of the society encourages the imbalances and inequalities between men and women. The Northern part of Nigeria is acknowledged for its religious and cultural disposition to early marriage and polygamy. Under-aged girls are given out in marriages to older men and are expected to start bearing children immediately they get married. The age gap and disparity in life experiences become advantageous to the men and their wives hardly stand the chance to question their authority and decisions as regards serious family issues that relate to the bodies of the women especially family planning; finances, family projects and other issues pertaining to the home or the woman's career. Women in these societies are positioned to constantly seek ways to please their husbands. Halima Sekula in her article on "Northern Nigeria Popular Fiction and Stereotypes of Women Ambition" examines the portrayal of Northern women in Nigerian fiction and posits that "the images of Northern Nigeria Women in popular fiction includes those of meek, virtuous women, vicious co-wives, rivals or stepmothers"¹¹⁰. This characterisation of women according to her is a reflection of the Northern Nigerian society which these works recreate. Sekula accuses Northern women writers of promoting gender stereotypes and encouraging the relegation of women in their works as their female characters who conform to gender roles and stereotypes are regarded as good women while those who attempt to subvert heteropatriarchy are regarded as bad women. She asserts "'good' is usually depicted as passive, meek and weak while bad is actively vicious" (111). In this study's examination of the engagement of Northern Nigerian women's agency in times of conflict, there will be an attempt to determine how the socio-cultural landscape of Northern Nigeria influences the extent of the women's achievement of agency and selfhood and how the writer frames the empowerment of women in conflict.

The violent riot that left hundreds of Christians and non-Northerners dead in October, 1991 also resulted in destructions of properties, leaving many people displaced and without means of livelihood. Using "the combination of factual material and creative imagination" (Onanuga, 35), Sule makes his readers aware of the ethno-religious violence that happens in the Northern part of Nigeria and its effects on the family. Lola Akande is apt in her description of *Sterile Sky* when she submits that the bigger story in the novel "seems to be the impact of religious crises on the lives of people who would have lived normal lives, but who are unable to do so because of the absence of security". She accounts that the problems in Baba's home are tied to the ethno-religious violence that eventually breaks his family. However, as much as this assertion is evident that this is a contributory factor, Sule frames as important what womanists call the complementarity of gender roles and the need for men and women to work together. As a result, this study argues that it is the inability of Oduala to respect and appreciate his wife's contributions to the home front after they were displaced and the absence of

psychological help and support for police officers like him are part of the causes the family's unresolved problems.

The novel establishes that Mama's life revolves around her home and her commitment to her children. Sule uses the image of the mother hen who is attached and devoted to the safety of her chicks repeatedly to describe Mama's commitment. In an instance, "she looked like an enraged mother hen" (31). Murtala testifies that "... Mama was a mother hen. Grandmama called her 'Mother-hen'. Mama could not possibly watch while the hawks of noontime violence picked her children away" (36). When she hears of her husband's loss of job, "her appearance ... had become that of an embattled mother hen" (209). The allusion to the mother hen to describe Mama connotes her protective nature and her belief in her personal strength to shield her loved ones from harm at the expense of her own safety and happiness. She dares her husband's anger when she confronts her husband and decided to move to the village, far from the chaos in Kano. Murtala describes her approach "Mama looked him straight in the eyes, her voice became low and each word came in emphatic cadence" (31). Readers familiar with the cultural landscape of Kano will realize that it takes a lot of courage for a woman to challenge the authority of her husband on issues on relocation and especially when it relates to taking the children away from their father. The reference to the mother hen is complete when Mama asks Oduala, "I should keep my children here and allow the hawks to snatch them from me? All of them? My children shall not die"(31). Kano becomes the hawk that Mama needs to rescue her children from and in the fashion of a woman who felt the need to take decisive steps, Mama disrupts the patriarchal order of the autonomous decision maker, leaving her husband little or no choice. Apart from making serious decisions about safe spaces for her children, Mama takes up the role of the breadwinner and the spiritual head of the family. She is portrayed as a dedicated Christian who prays and leads her children to Church and before and after her family's displacement, she trades to provide for her home. The need to provide financially for her family increases when her husband lost his job.

Parts of the questions to be answered in this study are: is Mama empowered as an individual, does she find the added roles stifling to her agency, freedom and selfhood? Is she more respected in her home and the society when she becomes the breadwinner, the sole decision maker, the religious head, moral compass and the centre that is expected to hold everything and everybody together? Discussing how difficult it is for women to "negotiate complex family and societal norms" (28), Indrani Gupta and Arjun Roy (2023) claim that financial autonomy through gainful employment improves the socioeconomic status of women and place them as active agents who are respected in the home and in the society at large. Economic empowerment for them situates women as decision-makers especially "if she is more educated than her husband and earns more than him" (28). Their submission invariably presupposes that equality is impossible in heterosexual marriages and for a woman to be truly empowered she must be in a place of superiority to her husband. This also means that for a woman to be respected, she must be financially independent and capable of contributing to the running of the home financially. It has been established that Mama is the sole breadwinner of her home especially when her husband is retrenched at the police force. Are the increased roles and responsibilities empowering or burdening?

Despite being the breadwinner, Mama is depicted as a frustrated woman and the limits to her power over the members of her family are underscored. Her characterisation and the attitudes of her family towards her promote the argument that women whose lives revolve their husbands and family are always unhappy. Her husband and children especially Imatum and Baba's breakaway from the family she tries to hold together "makes the readers realize how hopeless it is to hope in the midst of traumatized individuals who have not had a chance to heal... after the horror and loss they had gone through" (Onanuga, 30). Baba and Imatum's individual trauma lead to their need to escape a continued suffering. Imatum is developed as a foil to Mama and in Imatum's case, her firsthand witnessing of her mother's sufferings strengthens her resolve to change the narrative of the weak, submissive albeit impoverished and belaboured woman. In describing Imatum from the earliest pages of his novel, Sule makes it evident to his readers that Imatum is ready to subvert the norm that privileges her brothers' education and wellbeing above hers. She is characterized as a young girl who realizes the limitations of poverty and who intentionally seeks out ways to break the generational cycle of unfulfilled dreams and sufferings. She is called the courageous one by her mother and, in taking her destiny into her own hands, Imatum seeks out men who are capable of providing for her needs and eventually marries an older man without the consent of her parents. The readers are aware that Imatum's sociocultural background negates this act but it is also evident to them that Imatum who had been deprived of western education would have been married off before her teens to an older man who might be of the same social standing like her father's. The girls had been told by Yakubu one of their brothers at a time "Mama said all of you girls will be taken to the village and married off soon. Only Ukpo and I will go to school" (5) and Murtala taunts Imatum "You should have been married off to a farmer" (76) to which Imatum replies "God forbid! Me? I'll marry a rich man, not a poor man like you and Baba"(76). The men in her life become the examples of the men she does not want as husband. Sule gives her the opportunity to subvert the norm of fathers handing over their young girls into early marriage. Realizing the fate that lies ahead of her, Imatum questions the masculinity and headship of her father. Daring him in such a manner is her way of revolting against his maltreatment of her mother. To Imatum, her father is poor and unkind. Her choice of a rich and caring husband is in direct opposition to what her father represents. She also sees it as a way "to make money and help my brothers and sisters" (128). Mama's disapproval of Imatum's decision to help the family is her way of punishing Imatum and sending warnings to her other daughters on the consequences of disregarding her teachings on morality and traditional ethos.

Sule emphasizes that Mama and Baba are complicit in the events leading to the break of their home. The blame-game the two of them play becomes detrimental to the happiness of their family. Baba describes his wife as Mama "a stubborn and senseless woman" (36); and a "foolish mother" (70) because she was at the market early in the morning and could not wake him up for the promotion interview he eventually misses; and the architect of all his problems. Mama on the other hand calls Baba "an irresponsible husband and father" (61); "She accused Baba of causing her depression, sang sad songs and read her Eloyi Bible silently"(126) and at a point stands up to question his masculinity with her gestures "pointing her index finger at his forehead" (179) and words "You call yourself a man, a father? Shame on you... Useless man like you... . Can't you see why you're no longer a man among men?"(179). Mama constantly

uses hurtful words to silence Oduala in her frustration. However, she fails to realize that her actions suppress Oduala's pride in himself as an African man. Indeed, his eagerness and enthusiasm to be lead is completely killed. Both Oduala and Mama are unappreciative of the other's efforts and though it is evident that Mama wants her husband to become a better person, his inability to overcome his excesses and weaknesses after the violent conflict that displaced them reduces his masculinity and worth to Mama. While Mama sacrifices herself for her husband and children, she is portrayed as a woman who gradually becomes disgruntled and discontented. She nags and mocks her husband's incapacities. It is believed that she ruins her efforts and drives her husband mad and away from their home by her actions. Murtala who seems to see it all is "exasperated by her attitude towards Baba and the mockery in her voice when she talked about his madness" (186).

Oduala Ede is placed in an existentialist cycle where he struggles to make sense of his place in life and in his home. His physical presentation which Murtala describes as "tall and had the brave appearance of a man who could withstand danger" (7) is in direct opposition to his capacities in the face of life's challenges. Growing up as a brilliant child, he could not further his education because his parents could not afford his fees. His masculinity is called to question when he could not protect his family in the violence that claimed many lives. He loses a son to the violence, loses his job after indulging in excessive drinking, falls into depression and finds it difficult to hold on to his mental strength. He is a non-participant in his trials and blames everybody but himself for his limitations. He says:

I agree with you that my wife is courageous, but she is also very unreasonable. Even when she sees how I suffer, denying myself what men like me wear or go out to do, just to make sure that our children have something to eat and go to school, she doesn't appreciate my efforts. She dismisses me as a no-good policeman, compares me with her friends' husbands and **regales her children with tales of my weaknesses** (emphasis mine, 99).

In Mama's defense, her husband did not understand her efforts to make him a better man and provider for the family. She had "advised him to look for a trade aside from his police work, because his salary is too small. ... He prefers to sleep" (101). Oduala refuses to meet her way half way and complement her efforts and this becomes obvious when she is given the chance to counter Oduala's narrative when she explains:

... I can't tell my children that their father is a hero when they themselves know he isn't one. The joy of every mother is to create harmony and happiness in her family, based on truth. Each day I wake up I set my hands to work, just to make my house happy... (100)

Mama is not ready to take the blame for her husband's (in)actions and (ir)responsibilities. Oduala lives up to the stereotype of 'dead beat' Black fathers and while there are studies calling for involved fatherhood across all nationalities (Grau, Maestro and Bowles, 2022), Black fathers are projected to still have a long way to go (Coles and Green, 2009). Sule makes it

obvious that Oduala's children are aware of his failings and, despite the fact that he often blames his wife for his woes, the novel makes references to the different times his children voice out their perceptions of their father. Oduala blames his wife for his wife for Imatum's behaviors and uses the cliché "like mother like daughter" (179) to tie together their attitudes. Murtala called the rational one sees through the tensions between his parents' approach to Imatum's waywardness. At Baba's accusatory comment of "Is that how to be a good mother?" when Mama decided not to look for a missing Imatum, Murtala reflects "I wanted to bark at him: *Is this how to be a good father, sitting here and asking me now about your stupid daughter who disappeared from your house days ago?...*" (emphasis in the text, 187). Murtala realizes that Baba's shifting of all the responsibilities at home to Mama while he hides is detrimental to everybody. The commitment of Mama to the wellbeing of her family is perceived by Baba as a continued emasculation. Having lost his job as a policeman, a job couched in power and display of violent masculinity in the context of policing in Nigeria, his home becomes the only place where he could exercise his authority and garner respect even if it is forced. When Oduala resorts to beating his wife, Imatum intervenes "do you want to kill our mother? Do you want to kill our mother? Kill her then! Kill her and kill all of us! Did she send you to drink? If you touch her again, I'll report you to the police. They will lock you up again" (154). Oduala loses the respect of all his children as his failure to overcome his personal failings and weaknesses in order to prioritise his family is known to all, including his little children. During the prayer session Mama organized after his disappearance, his third son prays:

Our father in heaven, listen to me or I will cry now. Have you not been seeing Mama crying? God, where is Baba? If you bring him back, make him not sleep again, so that he can go out to look for job and buy me a good pair of jeans. Then we will have good food... (222)

This innocent prayer points to how Oduala's children regard his absence and the impact of his absence on their mother and their living conditions. Their perception of Oduala's fatherhood and legacy are that of cruelty, laziness and neglect. His sons experience the rearrangement of traditional gender roles as Mama subverts the traditional roles of decision maker, provider and breadwinner.

The inability to provide for the home or assert control as the family head leads to an emasculated masculinity (Dover 2005; Donaldson & Howson 2009). Sule shows the gradual emasculation of Oduala. The continued troubles that plagued him distort his world view and lead him close to the state of self-destruction. Sule describes how Baba, in the early hours of the night runs, drunk and stark naked out of his room to the compound's shared bathroom while "the children, women and men sitting in front of their doors, under the moonlight, watched in dismay"(130). His lack of the makers of manhood: power and money after losing his job, leads him to display a violent masculinity by beating his wife. These are compounded by the news of his daughter's pregnancy, and he goes in a downward slope into an existentialist pit. He realizes that among the men in his compound, he is the only one who fails to live up to the order of the dominant masculinity. In his realization of lack, he echoes James Charlton (2006)'s view of the perception of difference:

we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. (219)

Baba first goes through the phase of ignoring his difference among other men. He could not succeed in this for long especially as there are constant reminders of his lack. Sule shows that Baba could not copy or destroy, nor challenge or change the cultural expectations of masculinity (Connell, 67) in his society. As a result, he runs away from it. Murtala notices that “Baba was becoming abnormal. Increasingly, he found solace alone in the inner room... The silence from his bed was awful ... His voice became rare in the house” (185) and in his aloneness, Oduala shuts out his children and wife “to Mama, he spoke infrequently and she did not mind him. At one point I thought a kind word from her might rescue him (186). References to Baba’s mental state and expressions of discontent includes “murmuring along with the newscasters, contorting his face,” (186), he scribbles existentialist thoughts and aphorisms like ‘such is life’ ‘life is beyond reason’ ‘life moves backward’ ‘even God forgets people’ ‘life is a mysterious’ ‘what is the meaning of life?’ ‘violence upon violence same violence’(202). These instantiations give the readers a glance into his state of mind and existentialist perceptions of life. It also points to his attempts to rationalize the meaninglessness of his postcolonial realities. Foucault views Baba’s type of madness as an outcrop of the discontents of civilization where people are driven into madness as a result of the social positions they find themselves and the economic pressures that surround their social class. Walking away from the family and seeking out solitude becomes for him the only way to stay sane in the midst of the responsibilities of his large family and as a means of escape from the violent person he suspects he is becoming in his home. He tells Murtala, “consider my leaving as an act of freedom...” 282, “... life turned into an enigma for me, to confront it, I have become an enigma too” (283), ... “I seek inner peace and energy” (284) and the last sentence in the novel spoken by Oduala reads “Tell everyone that I await the triumph of my soul” (286). Prioritizing himself and his mental health above the needs of his wife and children, Oduala becomes the direct contrast of his wife. His image of the irresponsible father and husband gains extension in his portrayal as a weak and selfish man whose incapability is foregrounded in trials.

Mama has no survival strategy like Oduala. She is drained and her task of the fire brigadier does not allow her pursue her happiness. Echoing Buchi Emecheta’s protagonist Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Mama, the only character who remains nameless and who is called only by her identity as a Mother, sacrifices all she has for her husband and children and is still blamed for not doing enough. After Imatum’s pregnancy and Baba’s disappearance Mama is described as “a woman just bereaved” (221) having sleepless nights and Murtala hears her one night murmuring “My God... my husband... my children” (221). However Mama is portrayed as stronger and resilient in the face of the many challenges she encounters. While her husband finds means of escaping from the troubles in his life through drinking, sleeping, solitude, physical violence, interpersonal dialogues and philosophical reflections, indulging in occasions of self flight and episodes of madness and eventual disappearance from home, Mama

is portrayed as staying back, fighting for her sanity and watching over the remaining members of her family. This engagement of women's strength in adversity is couched as reductive of personal agency and while Mama fronts a strong exterior to her husband and children, the image of the strong woman is detrimental to her self-actualization and happiness.

Sule provides the readers the opportunity to see the opposite of Oduala's family. Both in affluence and in marital happiness, Ola's family are seen as thriving and seemingly untouched by the crisis in Kano especially as the GRA they live is peaceful. The impact of the environment families are situated in on the wellbeing of the family is highlighted here. Onanuga (2023) posits that the environment individuals inhabit has a lot to contribute to their lived experience. Mama had repeatedly emphasized relocation from Sabon Gari as she knows that their wellbeing is tied to the community her family resides. In the same cultural landscape in Northern Nigeria, although untouched by violence, displacement and poverty, Ola's home is a happy and successful one. Despite their ethnic and religious differences, Ola's parents are portrayed as not only tolerant along ethnic and religious lines, they are characterized as "being complementary and balanced...rather than being conflictual or competing for the same positions of social and political power (Newell, 3), this time within the home for the good of everybody concerned. This lends credence to the argument that added to the violent conflict that displaced them, the absence of harmony and agreement are contributory factors to the eventual outcomes of Oduala's family.

Conclusion

The different levels of victimization of women have been studied in Sule's novel. When men are at the helms of affairs and are seen as the architects of war and violence, the absence of women in political leadership and discussions that determine when a society is at peace or at war is reductive to whatever agency women have in times of conflict or post conflict as their interventions are decided by the men and the society. The Nigerian nation state continues to experience divisions along religious and ethnic lines and women experience increased gender roles. They take domestic decisions, finance the home, see to the control and discipline of the children while trying to find themselves in the midst of the chaos. In Sule's novel, men are the perpetrators of the killings and the destructions that serve as the catalyst for Mama's troubles. As Mama is far from silent, docile, weak and submissive, Sule's work is about two individuals who are in constant conflict in their efforts to be active agents in the home. This clash of wills and the inability to defer to, respect and complement the abilities of the other when the need arises lead to the break of the family. While womanism still defers to patriarchy and reduces women's agency and success to the cooperation of men, in *Sterile Sky*, it is evident that if Baba had sought psychological help, reflected on his weaknesses, realized the extent of his wife's roles and sacrifices while contributing his own quota, the family would have thrived in adversity. From the foregoing, Sule's novel shows that strong and responsible men in complementary gender roles are indispensable to the success of the family. Such framing makes it easy to conclude that instead of empowering women, the text characterises women as flawed and deeply limited in their increased roles during and after violent conflicts.

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