Stories of Women

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Daughters of the house: the adolescent girl and the nation

In relation to the national son, the self-defining inheritor of the post-independence era and the protagonist of the nation-shaping narrative, the female child is a – if not the – non-subject within the national family romance. Revealingly, if paradoxically, given that her self-determination has been in principle achieved, the daughter figure within the framework of the postcolonial narrative that inscribes the new nation is, if not subordinate, peripheral and quiet, then virtually invisible.

The pre-eminent status of national sons, and the overshadowed position of their sisters, is exemplified in postcolonial fiction from the 1950s and into the 1990s by writers as diverse as George Lamming, Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, Alex La Guma, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Romesh Gunesekera. A nuclear family fronted by a male heir is emblematically carved onto Gikonyo’s stool, a gift of marital reconciliation presented at the end of Ngugi’s A Grain of Wheat (1967). By contrast, the daughter of the new nation in male-authored texts is predominantly pictured, as ever, as homebound and tradition-bound. She inhabits either private spaces or the peripheries of public, national space. As in the case of the veiled Jamila, Saleem Sinai’s sister in Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (1981), the daughter’s fate encapsulates the negative destiny of the nation whenever early national promises are betrayed: she is in this sense, as befits her status, a lesser or secondary national ‘mother’, a subsidiary figurehead.

Postcolonial women writers have, however, confronted the symbolic inheritance that is the peripheral figure of the postcolonial national daughter, whether child or adolescent, either as a part of, or in addition to, adopting the writerly resistance strategies outlined in the previous chapter. Their engagement with women’s national identity therefore emerges not only in the mani-
fest content of their work, but also, for example, in their preoccupation with rewriting authoritative cultural texts. Instead of resuscitating and resituating the fetishised tropes of motherlands, some women writers have chosen to revise the family dramas that structure national narratives, including the male Bildungsroman and nationalist autobiography, by focusing on the roles and character of daughters. In particular, they have explored the daughter’s relationship to her immediate, father-led family, and to the patrilineal community of which it is a microcosm. They have dramatised her negotiated bid for self-hood and status within what might be called the national house, that is, within the inherited and correlated structures of both family and nation-state.

This chapter will address how three very different postcolonial women writers, each one a ‘daughter’, if lost or prodigal, to one or other nation, have written themselves into the national family script, or redrafted the daughter’s relationship to the national father. The novels in question are: the expatriate Australian Christina Stead’s The Man Who Loved Children (1940), a realist narrative of qualified daughterly rebellion set in North America; the Nigerian-born London writer Buchi Emecheta’s Destination Biafra (1982), a journalistic tale which intervenes in a history of civil (hence fraternal) conflict in order to foreground the role of a woman go-between; and the American-born Canadian Carol Shields’s Unless (2002), a mother’s story in which a daughter’s silence is presented as protest. The chapter will concentrate in particular on the daughter’s position in the three novels relative to the family, tradition or community, where these structures are in each case figured as analogous to or integrated with the nation. I will thus approach the narratives as gender and nationalist theories-in-text – as texts which attempt to work out the daughterly possibilities within the social and national frameworks they inscribe. The writers of course speak for widely divergent postcolonial constituencies – a heterogeneity that must be recognised. Yet, despite their varying determinations, all three are distinguished by their preoccupation with daughterhood, broadly interpreted, and with the young woman’s position in relation to wider, national society, and this if nothing else justifies netting them together within a comparative reading.

Towards setting up the comparative frame, the gender roles inscribed within what I earlier called the national family drama can be further elaborated by drawing on Olive Schreiner’s The Story of an African Farm (1883) as an interpretative paradigm, which I will do at two points, here and later on. Schreiner’s novel’s temporal co-ordinates usefully give historical expansion to the triangulated group of Stead, Emecheta and Shields, while her nineteenth-century context counterbalances and complements the mid- and late twentieth-century, and early twenty-first-century perspectives of the other texts, respectively. Together, the four texts create a type of cross-connected intertextual matrix.
In *The Story of an African Farm* the South African settler-writer Olive Schreiner self-consciously establishes the figure of the child as at once 'primitive' and as the social pariah of the colonial world represented by the microcosm of the South African Karoo farm. The child in this sense operates within the narrative as a synecdoche for the native, where black Africans are represented largely as simple-minded and inarticulate, if also as perceptive. All three children are orphans: it is as if they have sprung fully formed from the arid soil of the farm. In the voice of the girl protagonist Lyndall, Schreiner draws an explicit analogy between 'the progress and development of one individual and of a whole [colonial] nation', in that the struggles for selfhood of the one equate with the other’s writ large (SAF 182). However, Lyndall adds, speaking to Waldo her closest friend on the farm, this analogy applies more to a boy like him than to herself. Lyndall’s own energies as a woman-in-the-making, she observes at length, must be directed to self-adornment rather than to the progress of a nation.

As is laid out in some detail in this book, the script of national coming-into-being that orchestrates postcolonial independence interpellates young men and women differently, as Schreiner perceives. Engaged in the difficult process of giving birth to itself, the emergent nation plays out a family drama in which colonial and/or native-nationalist fathers bequeath power, not without a struggle, to their male heirs. (In Schreiner’s colony, however, the parental generation is either absent or morally deficient.) In most texts the national heir is typically a leader, soldier, prophet, pedagogue or writer, or a combination of these: in all cases he is engaged in definitively shaping the new community (Waldo the carpenter is an artist and also, as we find out, an amateur engineer). First-generation post-independence male writers certainly energetically involve themselves in the process of engendering inspirational national stories out of the stuff of their own lives. By contrast, young women, the daughters of the nation, have generally not been in a position to shape the nation by means of their own self-generated narratives. Even if they escape the symbolic burdens of the national mother, they traditionally remain the objects or recipients of national definitions, not their originators.

And yet, although the stories of national daughters are rarely regarded as authoritative in the same way as are those of their brothers, they are as writers more advantageously positioned to intervene in the national drama than is the iconic mother. Their intervention is double-edged for, by articulating their own struggles for selfhood, as does Lyndall, they not only address their traditional muteness and/or marginality in the national script, but also, in so doing, rewrite their role within it. Writing becomes their vehicle of agency. By writing themselves as children and citizens of the nation, they rework by virtue of who they are the confining structures of the national family to encompass alternative gender identities. Moreover, they break out of the synchronic/symbolic and
into the temporal dimension of the nation-in-formation – into its 'homogeneous time', in Benedict Anderson's phrase – which their fathers and brothers had earlier claimed.

The national impact of daughterly intervention possibly explains why it is that a large number of first- and second-generation postcolonial women writers have taken up family narratives in order to examine girl children's relations with their parents or parent surrogates. Margaret Atwood, Anita Desai, Bessie Head, Nadine Gordimer, Jamaica Kincaid, Manju Kapur, among others, confront what it is to be engendered, and gendered, by the patriarchal family, community or nation-state. For them, as for Louie in The Man Who Loved Children for example, writing itself becomes the expression of a troubled will-to-identity through which the female child imagines herself into autonomous being, abandoning the dependent, derivative position of the traditional daughter. Here, then, is another difficulty which women writers as national daughters must explore. The duties and responsibilities of daughterhood must be remade in order to produce texts that diverge persuasively from the male-authored script of national self-formation. Although Rosa Burger in Nadine Gordimer's Burger's Daughter (1979), for instance, tries to free herself from parental bonds in bold and creative ways, she cannot escape the ethical claims her father's political past places upon her. As Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers suggest in their study Daughters and Fathers, daughter texts must be determinedly self-authoring to 'produce texts that confirm independent separation from the father's authority'.

At this point it should of course be acknowledged that such considerations apply to most texts that deal with daughters' relations to parental authority. It is after all the underrated, downgraded or subordinate position of the daughter within cultural scripts that conditions her status in national texts also. As Boose and Flowers write:

Of all the binary sets through which we familiarly consider family relationships, the mother–daughter and father–daughter pairs have received the least attention, a hierarchy of value that isolates the daughter as the most absent member within the [social and cultural] discourse of the family institution.

While this situation has been redressed to some extent by western feminist attention to the mother–daughter relationship, the father–daughter dyad continues to represent an area of neglect. In western literature and in literatures influenced by the west, the latter relationship, which this chapter recasts as the nation–daughter relationship, has been transmitted and understood through a number of influential, mutually reinforcing dyadic paradigms – Zeus and Athena, God and Eve, Prospero and Miranda. Each one of these firmly inscribes the father’s power, and the daughter’s non-presence or non-assertion anywhere outside the dyad.
To grant the Eve/Miranda figure a will-to-identity that extends beyond the definitive paradigm is fundamentally disruptive, therefore, not only of the dyad, but also of scripts of cultural and national authority more generally. Tradition and authority are heavily invested against making any change. For the daughter, benefit and protection are exclusively to be obtained by deferring to the father. This is again in marked contrast to the restorative son figure who, in relation to the nation, has the power to rewrite the colonial past. Indeed, as I will show, the would-be rebellious Miranda characters occupying centre-stage in both Stead and Emecheta, or seeking moral authority in Shields, achieve only a qualified, uncertain or compromised success despite their efforts to break free from the cultural legacies that buttress their fathers’ authority.

‘Undelivered’ daughter: Schreiner’s Lyndall

Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* interprets the Karoo homestead as a figure for colonial society, as Ruth First and Ann Scott among others have noted. In relation to the ridiculous but by no means inconsequential figure of the farm-owner Tant’ Sannie, the children, the child of nature Waldo and the two girls, the submissive Em and the rebellious Lyndall, are positioned as subordinate, exploited, voiceless. They all discover that it is necessary to leave the farm in order to come into their own in some small way as independent agents.

Contrasted with Waldo, the girl-child Lyndall is pictured within the repressive structure of the farmstead not only as the figure of the colonised, for this would include Waldo also, but, explicitly, as the powerless colonial daughter. She is subject to and inhabits, yet in no sense is able to inherit, the traditions and legacies of the farm. Anxious to leave its strictures behind her, to educate herself (SAF 77), and to resist women’s traditional role as mother (SAF 167), she is uncertain, however, to what end her efforts should be directed, what position she might fill. Aware of lacking formal power in the wider colonial world, she feels, as she tells Waldo, ‘branded’ and cursed in that she is a woman (SAF 171). Significantly, she also describes herself as undelivered of herself, as lacking the agency to deliver, to be delivered of. Looking forward to a time when ‘woman’s life is filled with earnest, independent labour’, when self-fulfilment, which she calls ‘sudden sweetness’, will be ‘not sought for, but found’, she comments: ‘I will do nothing good for myself, nothing for the world, till someone wakes me. I am asleep, swathed, shut up in self; till I have been delivered I will deliver no one’ (SAF 179).

It is a predictable outcome of her hyperbolic representativeness that Lyndall dies as a result of childbirth and her baby does not live. As both a woman locked into domesticity and as the daughter of a derivative, stagnated society (which does not yet identify nationally and would be racially divided if it did), she literally cannot deliver herself of anything. The daughter enclosed within the
sterile, alienated colonial family here represents an unshaped and unshaping, unrealisable potential.

Yet it is not only Lyndall and her baby who are dead by the end of the novel. To this extent the novel demonstrates, especially in its silences, its not saying, that the cultural script of the deferential colony, while it stultifies daughters, also withholds narratives of self-making from its native sons. In its final scene Waldo, too, dies, though unlike Lyndall he returns to the farm before his death. Their deaths thus have different valencies. If Lyndall’s refusal to endure represents a protest which, however limited, the farmstead cannot countenance and must exclude, Waldo’s death in the bosom of the farm suggests that the reproduction of the society itself has become untenable. The colonial/adult world in which vindictive white men are dominant is a sterile place. It defeats aspirations, repels idealism; it offers no alternative sources of identification, no escape routes from the child’s social alienation. The child in this novel, to adapt from a reading by Jo-Ann Wallace, is forced to remain mere raw human capital, primitive, untapped, not fully developed, by analogy of course with ‘unimproved’ and ‘unevolved’ colonised people.10

Rereading the canonical script: Stead’s Louie

The Man Who Loved Children by Christina Stead appeared just prior to the independence era, yet it far-sightedly participates in a number of postcolonial preoccupations, most notably in this context the idea of the child within the family as embodying an exploited, unformed potential that signifies the colonised also. From its opening pages the novel unfolds a disturbing family drama in which the eldest daughter Louie, the focaliser, seesaws between her allegiance to her father Sam Pollit, based on her respect for his knowledge and authority, and her attachment to her abjected stepmother Henny, founded on the gender loyalty. Accompanying this unsteadiness, the novel’s underlying national identifications are subtly split – divided between, on the one hand, the United States with its Civil War scars, where the novel is set, and whose national icons the text investigates, and, on the other hand, Stead’s native Australia, which provides a strong narrative undertow. As the only one of Sam’s six children to grow up lacking her biological mother, who died in her infancy, Louie is at once freer to define herself but the more a victim of her ‘Uncle Sam’ father’s ‘czar-like’ whims and edicts.

Swarming and boisterous, yet stifled by their father’s absolute command – shaped to his will, governed by his work schemes, made to contribute to the family economy – the children of Sam Pollit, ‘the Great White Father’, in several ways equate with the classic subaltern, the wretched of the earth (MLC 105). Exploited and harshly disciplined, they form, it could be said, the underclass of the parental state (see, for example, MLC 337–9).11 At home Sam is the
self-confessed absolute ruler, the ‘Monomaniac’ in Louie’s words, who sees his children as extensions of his own nature (‘You are myself’). Unsurprisingly, the women in the family bear the brunt of this tyranny. While he seeks to mould his sons in his image, he imposes culturally subservient roles upon his daughters and subjects his recalcitrant wife to relentless verbal and financial persecution. Moreover, as the narrative takes pains to signal, Sam’s patriarchal power over his family connects vitally with his broader political ideology, as expressed in his professional ambitions as a naturalist. To Sam the world, like the home, is an arena in which to actualise authoritarian, eugenicist beliefs: there is little in his view to distinguish the two spheres.

The interconnection becomes explicit on Sam’s Smithsonian Field Expedition to Malaya where, like a true orientalist, his objective is to classify, organise and produce the country as a scientific object for US consumption. At this point in the novel the ‘displaced’ Australian-born Stead, who wrote *The Man Who Loved Children* in America, intriguingly maps her antipodean landscape and colonial experience on to the politically and mythically invested coordinates of Washington DC, where the Pollits’ two family homes are located. In Malaya, in a series of darkly ironic scenes that tell strongly against him, an excited yet climactically overwhelmed, sweating Sam shares with his native colleagues his two central eugenicist fantasies. First, there is his concept of ‘the One Great Nation’ (or ‘internation’) of the future, a globalised, US-dominated empire based on his own principle of unequal, international brotherhood. Second, he outlines a fantasy of fathering a family of many-coloured babies, unmistakably a seedbed and prototype for that same Great Nation (*MLC* 235–9, 247, 311, 380: the family-nation analogy is thus carefully established). In Judith Kegan Gardiner’s description: ‘[the] father’s domestic narcissism [is identified] with the capitalist patriarchy that dominates the [“childlike”] undeveloped world [sic].’ The two exist in symbiotic relationship. As this implies, child, especially daughterly, rebellion in Sam’s world signifies the ultimate – the most difficult, costly and disruptive – project of liberation, breaking open the tightly packed equations of domestic, national and international/imperial power.

The rebellious Louie is, crucially, a writer, and it is through her different forms of writing – journals, poems, doodles, drama – that she struggles to inscribe a selfhood which is also a potential citizenship of a new political future. In a classic anti-colonial and feminist move, she appropriates the role model of male literary genius (*MLC* 163), as well as her beloved writers’ canonical works, and manipulates them to articulate her own resistance. Rejecting the constraints of womanhood by claiming the privileges of men, she seeks to recast the ‘obscene drama’, as she calls it, of her family’s life (*MLC* 337). She writes a coded diary, which her snooping father cannot read, stages her play *Herpes Rom*, probably her moment of greatest triumph within the family circle,
and dedicates a sonnet cycle to her admired school teacher Miss Aiden, thereby disrupting traditional patterns of male literary filiation. The message this ‘natural [outlaw] of womanhood’ signals to her uncomprehending father is clear: ‘I am triumphant, I am king’ (MLC 351).

Louie’s play Tragos: Herpes Rom (Tragedy: The Snake Man), written in a ‘pseudo-classical gibberish’ which baffles her father, whose birthday present it is, rewrites Shelley’s The Cenci but also bears the imprint of Genesis and John Milton’s Paradise Lost.14 By means of the play, in which a daughter is strangled, literally stifled, by her serpent father, Louie shockingly exposes and rejects her father’s rule, enacting her deeply subversive wish to ‘hunt [him] out like the daughters of King Lear’ (MLC 408). Not long after this she contributes more practically to heightening the family drama by acting as a knowing if finally helpless accomplice in her stepmother Henny’s suicide. But the primary medium of her quarrel with her father is her play, whose language and patricidal urges defeat his understanding, reducing him, the would-be all-knowing patriarch, to a ‘stupor of amazement’ (MLC 407).

The sense of recalcitrant autonomy Louie develops through her writing eventually enables her to leave home, her destination her mother’s home-ground, Harpers Ferry, a key site of John Brown’s resistance to slavery. The child who was once disturbed by being called ‘a norphan’ (MLC 199), now enacts her fantasy of being parented, or so she hopes, by relative strangers (MLC 373). In contrast with Lyndall’s sense of being undelivered of herself in Schreiner’s novel, Stead’s iconic daughter rejects her father’s demand that she mother her motherless siblings, choosing rather, as she announces, to be her own mother: to engender her own future (MLC 511, 521).

The last scene of the novel sees Louie leaving on what she romantically if vaguely styles her ‘walk around the world’, yet what the substance of her new life might be is something that is left unresolved (MLC 523). Most of her writing up to this point has remained strongly derivative even in its resistance; indeed she has on occasion self-defensively demonstrated complicity with her father’s hatred of femininity. It is unclear therefore whether her attempt to inscribe her protest by rewriting the canonical masculine texts of Europe and America has given her enough independence of spirit to forge out on her own for very long. As for the alternative offered by Harpers Ferry, here, too, a repressive, highly puritanical, patriarchal regime prevails. Louie was tellingly not made welcome on a previous visit.

At the close of The Story of an African Farm Lyndall is dead. At the end of The Man Who Loved Children Louie the chief rebel, the eldest daughter of the American (and colonial Australian) white nation, is lustily alive, convinced of her new powers to resist and thrive. Yet what her ‘daughterly declaration of independence’ might consist in, what social or creative alternative it offers, is effectively as ambivalent and foreclosed as it is in Lyndall’s world.15 Although
she had no use for the feminist label as a writer, Stead with this novel demonstrates an awareness that gender identity significantly complicates already uncertain national identifications (where, for example, America overlays Australia). Louie is finally unable to negotiate a role for herself outside the filiative, patrilineal networks that configure the nation. Without the means to enlist into a new community, the implication is that the daughter’s inscription of a role in the national story forces her to take a pathway away from familiar political frameworks, towards a realm where, as for Stead, as for Buchi Emecheta, national affiliations are doubled and complicated.

Being it all: Emecheta’s Debbie

Like Christina Stead, Buchi Emecheta’s national identifications are ambivalent, yet she, too, attempts to write a daughterly role into an unsettled national script. A novelist concerned at once with expatriate Africans in Britain and with changing conditions for women in West Africa, Emecheta’s struggle to locate herself within the once-colonial metropolis while simultaneously maintaining links with her homeland has informed much of her work. In no other novel, however, is she as centrally preoccupied with the role of the daughter of the nation, and with the nation’s heterogeneous makeup, as she is in her 1982 novel of civil war, *Destination Biafra*.

In her historical novels, such as the acclaimed *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), and in fantasies such as *The Rape of Shavi* (1983), Emecheta’s approach, like Flora Nwapa’s, is to recast African social space as inhabited by women over time and to define the postcolonial nation from their perspective. Indeed, in the autobiographical *Head Above Water* (1986) she self-consciously situates herself as a ‘new [woman] of the new Africa’, more assertive, more complex (she claims) than her mothers, but still connected with the past, and situated within a family lineage of female storytellers. As with Stead and Schreiner, therefore, Emecheta’s method might be characterised as broadly ‘temporal/territorial’ according to the definitions set out in the previous chapter, but also as (auto)biographical, in so far as her heroines play out episodes from her family’s matrilineal history. In most of the West African novels, keynote experiences in the lives of African women across the twentieth century – in-group slavery, the ‘double yoke’ of the educated woman in Africa, the contradictory ‘joys’ of motherhood – are transformed into the organising leitmotifs of her narratives. In order to raise female subjects into twentieth-century Igbo/Ibibio history, she extracts a lexis of significant metaphors or defining images from those subjects’ lives – images which in each case arise specifically from their day-to-day reality.

Emecheta’s West African work can therefore be read as a more or less chronological collection of themed essays on the condition of eastern Nigerian
women across the past 80-odd years. Rewriting the past in order to ‘write home’, her work offers a gender-aware commentary on Achebe’s epochal oeuvre and runs in intertextual parallel with Nwapa’s endeavour. Emecheta, it could be said, has openly constructed herself as a literary daughter or younger sister to Nwapa. Although there may be some ground to the criticism that her heroines are confined to their biological and sex roles (where Destination Biafra arguably escapes this charge), her entire corpus is energised by the enabling, can-do assertiveness which Igbo culture approves in market women.

Emecheta’s commitment to historical intervention and national reinvention is vividly demonstrated in her novel of the 1967–70 Biafra War, Destination Biafra. The war having been widely represented in narratives by male writers, she sets out to fictionalise the painful history of national division from a woman’s point of view. Where Nwapa’s war novella Never Again (1975) portrays the part played specifically by Biafran wives and market women in the war, Emecheta goes a stage further by dealing in more representative detail, and in an openly assertive way, with the subject of women’s roles in national life during wartime. In particular she is interested in how the experience of a young, unmarried woman, Debbie Ogedemgbe, a self-consciously patriotic daughter of a federated Nigeria, both refracts the broad scene of the war and eventually, even if with limited success, redefines the nation. Of course, as Emecheta would have known from the start, the Biafra material was not particularly tractable for her purposes. Unlike the Algerian or Zimbabwean wars of liberation, the conflict did not put female combatants in the frontline (although women did serve in militias, as Achebe’s Girls at War acknowledges). Her solution is to aim at the very heart of the male-dominated narrative of the war. Boldly reading Biafra’s history with a woman-centred focus, she invents an idealised heroine, a ‘dream woman’ who identifies with a reunited Nigeria, who is a member of no dominant ethnic group, and who is placed, improbably but also uncompromisingly, in the thick of the fratricidal conflict-mongering of the time.

Destination Biafra’s fairly even-handed reconstruction outlines the build-up to hostilities from 1959, just prior to Nigerian independence, telescopes the colonial and neocolonial causes of the conflict, and describes in some detail the key battles. The reported action, which relies heavily on journalistic summary, enumerates atrocities on both sides. Significantly, Emecheta is in this narrative of civil war loyal to the idea of Nigeria as a national entity, in this respect endorsing Wole Soyinka’s to-her-inspirational nationalist commitment in his memoir of the war, The Man Died (1972). Within the linear narrative frame, it is the Oxford-educated, middle-class Debbie’s story that knits the history together. Her mission of national rescue is closely bound up with a personal pilgrimage of self-discovery: the conjunction is important.

Where Biafra threw into stark relief the contradictions of a unitary nationalism defined by inherited colonial borders, Emecheta attempts to reconcile
some of the nation’s divisions in the person and role of her resilient heroine. It is Debbie’s symbolic mission to travel from Federal Nigeria into Biafra as an emissary of peace for Saka Momoh’s Federal government (Momoh being the equivalent of the historical Yakubu Gowon). She is asked to persuade the Biafra leader Chijioke Abosi (the Lt Colonel Ojukwu surrogate), who is a former friend of hers, to sue for reconciliation. He will be tempted, it is hoped, by Debbie’s ‘feminine charms’ (DB 123). As this implies, Emecheta’s attitude to nationalism and its impact on women, specifically their sexuality, is not free of ambivalence. By contrast, towards the end of the novel, Uzoma Madako, one of the women with whom Debbie is travelling across the war-torn country, makes the following comment on the marked divergence between the hopes of peace, and the present harsh reality of war and its implications for women: ‘A few years ago it was “Independence, freedom for you, freedom for me”. We [women] were always in the background. Now that freedom has turned into freedom to kill each other, and our men have left us to bury them and bring up their children (DB 214).’ From Uzoma’s point of view, nationalist politics as run by men make up a harsh tale of internecine conflict and betrayed hope in which women have a place only at the beginning and end points of birth and death. On the road Debbie sees soldiers horrifically rape and murder a pregnant woman, another of her travelling companions (DB 136). Even if unintentionally, the massed historical detail of the novel sharpens the overall impression of a meaningless recurrence of violent conflict – a conflict waged by brutalised troops, directed by an alienated leadership, and masterminded by foreign powers.

As a figure counterbalancing the bleak national situation, Debbie Ogedemgbe anticipates another form of national being: more integrated, inclusive and tolerant, but equally self-assertive, neither pre-1967 Nigeria, nor post-1967 Biafra. Like Stead’s Louie she carries a burden of generalised hope for the future. Appropriately, therefore, rather than continuing to act as a soldier in the Federal forces, Debbie becomes in the course of the novel a peacemaker. She begins her mission to Biafra as the representative of a small elite, yet learns in the course of her journey to identify with the masses of women in flight that she encounters, on the grounds of their suffering together as women. Having tried and failed to participate in the ‘men’s war’ by joining the army – defying her mother by ‘[doing] something more than child breeding’ (DB 45) – she performs at the last the volte-face of volunteering to care for war orphans. Her task will be to reconcile maternal values with her nationalist aspirations. Far from being the token female representative of the national status quo, as her Federal bosses see her, she comes to stand for an egalitarian, if traditionally defined nationalism. Marie Umeh reflects the idealism that went into the creation of the character when she observes that Debbie ‘is symbolic of Nigeria in search of its rightful place in world history’.24
As this implies, Emecheta ultimately endorses Nigerian nationalism as a viable political belief for her country, even if she is wary of its flawed incarnations in ethnic violence, government corruption and gender-based oppression. In her foreword to the novel she emphasises the non-sectarian aspects of Debbie’s public identity: Debbie identifies and is identified as ‘neither Ibo nor Yoruba nor Hausa, but simply a Nigerian’. As such she is the sign of a better nation, ‘the [non-tribal] Nigeria I would like to see’ (DB vii–viii). For Emecheta, therefore, the first conditions of Nigerianness – a concept that is taken as both self-evident and possible – are non-partisanship and interethnicity. Hence her often expressed attachment to her border town of Ibuza, a community which was attacked by both sides in the war and thus experienced to its fullest extent its cruel absurdity.

However, a novel which charts the excesses of a nationalism gone awry acknowledges, too, that the concept of Nigerianness can for the present only be theoretical, and, given Debbie’s class status, may even be something of a bourgeois fantasy, a ‘dream’. In a symbolic scene following her capture by Federal troops, Debbie declares: ‘I am not on anyone’s side. I am on the side of Nigeria. I want Nigeria to be one as we have always been’ (DB 175). She adopts the familiar rhetoric of national independence struggles, recognisable for its concern to implant a ‘true Nigeria’ dating from precolonial times. Yet this is an isolated and embattled declaration, one which is immediately contradicted by Debbie’s captor, the Hausa officer Salihu Lawal, who mocks her idealism with the comment: ‘You are wrong, young lady from England. Nigeria has not always been one’. Privately Debbie concedes that ‘Nigeria was only one nation as a result of administrative balkanisation by the British and French powers’ – yet she does not have much time to pursue this line of thought (DB 175). Lawal drags her away and rapes her, only to back off in disgust soon after when Debbie informs him that she was earlier gang-raped by her fellow soldiers, Nigerians from the south of the country. Here Emecheta opens an important axis within the complex of intersections between gender and nationalism, acknowledging that women’s subordinate status in relation to the nation has historically had, as one of its more violent consequences, rape. Debbie takes on in this scene the problematic role of victim of a type of institutionalised sexual assault, becoming the literal vehicle or channel for a mingling of ethnicities.

Lawal’s comment on an impracticable united Nigerianness, emphasised by his violent gesture of aversion, is left suspended over the rest of the text, exposing the implications for women when national affiliation is configured through discriminatory, gendered distinctions. If Debbie’s status as other to the Nigerian national entity was at first signalled by her English education, foreign perspective and elite position (not forgetting also her Irish ascendancy boyfriend, Alan Grey), her distance from the nationalist mainstream is now
further confirmed by the officer’s rejection. She is punished for her visibility, her agency, her involvement in the thick of things, by brutally being made to serve as a site of male bonding. By the same token, in an instance of painful irony on Emecheta’s part, her ordeal demonstrates that, as before, it is chiefly as body that woman plays a part in national experience. Nationalist politics remain divisive and oppressive: Debbie is doubly rejected, both for having mixed with northern and southern Nigerians and, as a female body, for having acted as the conduit for that mixing. As Abosi says when rejecting her peace mission (effectively a bid to be recognised as a national subject): ‘You are not a man’ (DB 239).

The ideal of an integrated, egalitarian Nigerianness therefore remains remote. As an ideal it is espoused by Debbie alone, and her status as at once self-proclaimed ‘daughter of Nigeria’ (DB 258), and as cultural and class outsider, exposes the idealism. She operates on both sides in a civil war, but without double-dealing; on every front she attempts to resist the barbarities of men, as well as the exploitation of neocolonialists, yet also magnanimously refrains from judging those who harm and insult her. In her attempt to lay claim to national subjecthood for Debbie as a woman, Emecheta falls back on the exorbitant trope of the bionic woman as national fighter familiar from revisionist nationalist texts by writers such as Ngugi.27 In such tropes the gender of the fighter is intended on one level to signify a new national ideology, yet at another level, especially in the hands of a woman writer, there is the concession that this ‘[super]woman of Africa’ is an almost entirely illusory and self-contradictory figure (DB 245). The reader is revealingly told that Debbie, the would-be defiant daughter of Nigeria, must still learn ‘to back’ a baby (DB 188). She cannot yet give expression to – cannot deliver – a practically viable Nigerianness that accommodates women in other than maternal roles.28

Static goodness: Shields’s Norah

Just as Buchi Emecheta takes up and expands her compatriot Flora Nwapa’s legacy with respect to privileging women, the Canadian Carol Shields develops her powerful peer Margaret Atwood’s focus on the lives of Canadian women. As against this commonality, however, Shields’s last novel Unless (2002) marks a number of differences in relation to the other daughterly texts discussed in this chapter.

As an American-born writer who moved to Canada as a young woman, Shields’s national co-ordinates may seem, at least potentially, as unsteady as Stead’s or Emecheta’s. Yet, despite her occasional forays into the United States in, for example, The Stone Diaries and Unless, her fiction is securely located in a Canadian landscape and social world. Unless is exemplary in this regard, mapping the day-to-day life of Reta Winters, a well-off, middle-aged writer,
mother and doctor’s wife living in southern Ontario, who rejoices in a happy marriage, a respected career, and a supportive and undemanding group of women friends (U 43). Hers is a multicultural political context in which women’s self-determination is legislated for and socially accepted. The repressions and exclusions of Schreiner’s and Stead’s colonial worlds, or the destructive divisions of Emecheta’s war-torn Nigeria, are not part of this picture.

And yet, even so, far more acutely and plangently than in the other narratives, this is a novel about the pain of misunderstanding and exclusion still suffered by women on a day-to-day basis – a pain which, the novel tries to claim, connects women in the west with women worldwide. As its troubled, trochaic title suggests, Unless is Shields’s lament for a women’s power which, regardless of a long struggle and some hard-won successes, is in the twenty-first century still largely unachieved – a power moreover which not only continues elusive but is likely to remain so (U 99–100, 224, 313–14). Women, in her opinion, have not so far been in a position to formulate fully and explicitly what their social and political authority might entail. She therefore shares with the Indian Shashi Deshpande, a writer of similarly ‘quiet’ narratives, although located in a significantly different cultural context, the assumption that the balance of favour in the world remains tilted to the disadvantage of women.29

Unless conditions change, Reta’s angry letters to various male pundits and opinion-makers across the course of the novel contend, women’s unease in the world, their out-of-jointness, is likely to continue (see, for example, U 136–7). Whereas men are allowed to be serious and get things done, women, if they are permitted to succeed, must do so without appearing threatening, by using charm (U 28–35). As this suggests, Shields is a writer, as Margaret Atwood acknowledges, who in the course of her writing career worked her way ever more deeply into feminism.30

In Unless the vehicle of women’s historical pain is Reta’s 19-year-old daughter Norah, who one day without explanation (before the beginning of the narrated action), opts out of life – her university degree and relationship – to sit on a street corner holding a cardboard sign inexplicably announcing ‘GOODNESS’. This is the source of the ‘great unhappiness’ in Reta’s life, which has changed the balance of how she views the world, and women’s place in it (U 1). The novel becomes the narrative of Reta’s attempt to comprehend and to some extent come to terms with her daughter’s act, to try, even if necessarily imperfectly, to comprehend it via a series of essay-like chapters ostensibly about the contingencies of her own life. Unless in other words is a mother’s story of a daughter who, up to the point that she takes to the street, is dedicatedly and sensitively parented. In this respect, too, the novel diverges from the tales of orphans and half-orphans told from the daughter’s perspective that I have explored so far.

In feminist rewritings, as in this chapter, the subjectivity of mothers (including the much symbolised national mother) is to a large degree displaced in
order to foreground the subjectivity of daughters. In contrast, Shields in *Unless* endorses the call issued by feminist critics such as Brenda Daly and Maureen Reddy to consider revisioning motherhood not as a biologically inscribed and conferred role, but as a choice, one which involves evoking the mother’s intersubjectivity with the child. As Shields writes, ‘a memoir must have a mother somewhere in its folds;’ which is also to say, however, that the writer must reconcile with her identity as a daughter. It is telling in this regard that the writer-narrator Reta begins her career as the translator of a respected bisexual, francophone feminist philosopher, Danielle Westerman, a literary mother figure. Thereafter, even as she herself branches into fiction, she continues with the intimate task of representing Westerman’s thoughts and sentences, ‘accommodating’ her *partis pris* in the ongoing translation of her memoirs.

Yet even if *Unless* takes the mother’s part, it is the sign of the daughter which is placed within a national if not transnational (or cross-cultural) dimension. As is only gradually revealed in the course of Reta’s at once troubled and curiously serene narrative, Norah was prompted to take her cryptic protestation of goodness to the streets following an unsuccessful attempt to assist ‘a Muslim woman [who] set herself on fire in Toronto’ (U 41). Reta and her friends, who mention the self-immolation in conversation, initially see the event as the symptom of a more widespread springtime depression that might be affecting Norah also, but otherwise as disconnected from the young woman. In an alternative explanation, Westerman, the novel’s de Beauvoir surrogate, concludes early on that Norah is acting out the traditional passivity and exclusion of women, which is in fact presciently close to the truth (U 104).

As the novel builds its case for Norah’s diagnosis (U 136), Reta and her circle have a discussion based on the assumption that goodness (in contradistinction to ‘greatness’, a male preserve) involves exercising ethical responsibility towards an other. In particular, being ‘on the path to goodness’ equates with re-presenting and attempting to alleviate another woman’s predicament (U 12, 115–18). However – here the political implications of ‘goodness’ become disturbed – the three examples of women in need which the friends give all refer to Third World, in fact ‘other’ women – from Mozambique, a ‘Muslim’ country and Nigeria, respectively. The second woman, though they do not know it, is the one Norah tried to help. In this case of a Muslim ‘sati’, the protest by self-immolation carried out by a woman in a burka, the friends remark only that an unspecified ‘woman’, assumed to be white Canadian, came to her aid and tried to beat out the flames with her hands. It is the burns on their daughter’s wrists and a CCTV videotape that eventually reveal to her parents that this woman was Norah. The reader is led to believe that the shock of this act, in effect the pain of spontaneous, cross-cultural empathy, drove her out on to her Toronto pavement in ‘an ellipsis of mourning’ (U 309). The sign she holds can
therefore be interpreted less as a claim of goodness for herself, than as an ironic label of the (in)significance of her act, a confession to the impossibility of translating the other body-in-pain.

However, by the end of the novel, once her daughter is restored to her, Reta’s narrative loses interest in the ethical and political questions that Norah’s impassive resistance, if that is what it is, poses. The moral axis around which the plot turns is thus left both politically and morally ambivalent – an ambivalence that poses significant problems in a text that earnestly professes its feminism. It is therefore as well to examine further the implications of Norah’s intervention as both a cross-cultural and as a gender-marked gesture.32

To begin with, the sheer unreadability of Norah’s sign, even to her parents, her lover and her sisters, suggests that within the nation, even the social democratic Canadian nation, the scope does not exist for a cross-cultural or transnational solidarity between women to be successfully realised. Perhaps the implication is even stronger than this: ‘daughter citizens’ lack a platform in the nation from which to express collectivity and make their voices heard. Just as in Norah’s university essay Madame Bovary is deemed ousted from the moral centre of Flaubert’s novel, the figure of the young woman is displaced from the moral centre of the nation. This much Reta would probably concede. Lacking the official sanction to convey a message Norah becomes ‘all perch, she and her silent tongue and burnt hands’ (U 310). She reaches out to the unnamed Muslim woman in her mysterious victimhood, to become herself a victim: it is a Levinasian act of conceding the absolute demand of the other that is, however, in this case both misdirected and misinterpreted.

Several other mixed messages and tangled ‘chains of semiosis’ further confuse the signifiers of ‘good’ and ‘woman’ which Norah bears, albeit that the novel appears only partially aware of them.33 Significantly, while staging her (im)passive protest, she is described using a vocabulary more immediately associated with an Indian, specifically Hindu, socioreligious context (a language of being ‘on the path’, for example), yet which in her situation is mystified and thus emptied of its political content. Not only the means of the protest but its object, too – the veiled woman in flames – crosses several signs of Third World female victimhood (sati, the veil) in such a way that the wrong that the woman may herself have been resisting is lost to view.

In the absence of any indication of what the Muslim woman’s cause might have been, Norah’s act of positioning herself as object in her place, no matter how empathetic her identification, replicates the appropriative moves characteristic of historical colonialism, as well as of certain forms of western feminism. The western feminist’s typical reading of the Third World woman as the victim of native patriarchy, as analysed by Chandra Mohanty and others, is generally followed by an attempt benevolently to intervene on her behalf.34 To this Shields importantly adds a second level of intervention, Norah’s replication of the
victim’s position in her retreat to an ascetic yet public protest, in which she keeps her own wounds hidden and surrenders agency by deploying an obscurantist language of gesture. In this she is presumably intended to be representing the marginalisation of women everywhere, yet as her mother consistently speaks for her, it is impossible to know for sure (U 197, 227). Norah carries a name allusive of Ibsen’s great feminist nay-sayer, but she is finally allowed only the word ‘Yes’ to affirm a question of her mother’s. Norah’s protest, in Danielle Westerman’s words, is an inversion rather than a subversion, ‘a retreat from society’ behind the figure of the burned, veiled woman that ‘borders on the catatonic’ (U 218). As if by way of a justification of this position, Reta explains towards the end of her daughter’s story that the world is divided into those who command power, men, and: ‘all of us who fall into the uncoded otherness in which the power to assert ourselves and claim our lives has been displaced by a compulsion to shut down our bodies and seal our mouths and be as nothing (U 270, emphasis added).

The three, or, with Schreiner’s paradigmatic text, four writers discussed above in their different ways demonstrate that ‘having a gender’ has an unavoidable impact on having a nationality or cultural identity. At each point on the intertextual matrix a daughter figure explores women’s tangential relationships to national and social structures, and the difficulty of writing a self-authorising identity, while also, in so doing, at once repeating and yet revising those difficulties. Schreiner and Stead, Emecheta and Shields, reveal that, when it comes to national family dramas, the symbolic dice are weighed against women’s self-representation. Although, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and other feminist critics have argued, it is in ‘the process of the creation of selfhood that self-cognition occurs, and an identity is taken on’, identities within the nation are at the same time communally authorised. As is indicated by the ersatz, perfectly made-to-measure quality of Emecheta’s idealised war heroine, on the public national stage the daughter’s identity, even if self-validated, also requires public recognition and respect.

Ultimately none of the daughterly options offered by the three postcolonial texts on their own suggest how women’s subjectivity might be refashioned in such a way as to produce equal participation on the national stage as well as publicly endorsed self-assertion. The point of still-virtual resolution may lie in a negotiated mediation between three options: neither a rewriting of masculine myths of authority alone, nor the fabrication of female icons and spaces, nor even gestures of universal solidarity made on the basis of shared oppression, but something of all three. The prerogative of daughter-citizens may be to activate what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the performative strategies of nationhood (even if his reading is not particularly attentive to gender). In writing a nation, he suggests, pedagogical or ideological imperatives, the nor-
mative categories of national authority (gender images, race), are creatively resisted by the invention or *performance* of new identities. In at least one of its incarnations nationalism, regenerative, protean, endlessly malleable, in fact stimulates and encourages such self-deliverance.

Notes

1 Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* [1883] (London: Virago, 1989). Page references to this edition will henceforth be included in the text along with the abbreviation SAF.

2 See the discussion of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in chapter 1.

3 Christina Stead, *The Man Who Loved Children* [1940] (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974); Buchi Emecheta, *Destination Biafra* (London: Fontana, 1982); Carol Shields, *Unless* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002). Henceforth page references to these editions will be included in the text with the abbreviations MWLC, DB and U, respectively.


6 Booze and Flowers (eds), *Daughters and Fathers*, p. 2.

7 On the cultural legacy of the Miranda figure, and the position of the daughter in the colonial script, see Laura E. Donaldson, *Decolonizing Fictions: Race, Gender, and Empire-building* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 1, 16–17.


9 A condition exacerbated by her property-less status.


14 Shelley’s The Cenci (1819) dramatises the story of Beatrice Cenci executed for the 1599 murder of her father.

15 See Yelin, From the Margins of Empire, p. 31.

16 In ‘Lagos provides a warm welcome’, West Africa (19–25 January 1981), 110, Emecheta speaks of England as a place that, though not ‘the country of my birth’, provided her with ‘comparative peace of mind to carry on with my creative work’. In Adeola James (ed.), ‘Buchi Emecheta’, In Their Own Voices: African Women Writers Talk (London: James Currey, 1990), pp. 34–45, Emecheta expresses self-satisfaction at being a writer living in England and working in the English language, and, as it were reciprocally, voices her disapprobation regarding contemporary Nigerian social conventions.


In the chronological line-up of her works, Emecheta has moved from autobiographical accounts of her life in London (In the Ditch (1972), Second-class Citizen (1974)), out to the Africa of her youthful memories and her foremothers’ stories, and then via historical and futuristic fantasy (Destination Biafra (1982), The Rape of Shavi (1983)), back to the synoptic autobiography of Head Above Water. Her more recent work returns to the experience of second-generation black women in Britain, as in Gwendoline (London: Collins, 1989).


21 The Biafra War broke out when, following Igbo massacres in northern Nigeria, oil-rich Igboland in the east of the still newly independent Nigeria attempted to secede from the republic, which then declared war. The war claimed 2.5 million lives.
The adolescent girl and the nation


23 See Emecheta, *Head Above Water*, p. 1. Debbie is neither Hausa, Ibo, nor Yoruba, but Itsekiri. She is also, though at different times, both a soldier and a peacemaker. In this chapter the allusions to the nation as a fraternity split by civil war ironically recall Benedict Anderson's description of the nation as a brotherhood, as discussed in the introduction.

24 Umeh, 'The poetics of thwarted sensibility', p. 203.

25 Speaking of her return to Nigeria in 1981 after a long absence of 18 years, Emecheta in 'Going home: Calabar, contrasts and complaints', *West Africa* (12–18 January 1981), 72, describes herself as susceptible to feelings of national loyalty. However, she indicates these sentiments would come more easily to her in a new-look Nigeria, one less corrupt, parochial and 'indisciplined': 'Somehow amidst the chaos I felt uplifted because to me the new National Anthem with the drums in the background is more the Nigeria I would like to see'.


28 Even so, Buchi Emecheta brings up for discussion, if in passing, the implications for a daughter's hard-won autonomy when she becomes a mother.

29 Shashi Deshpande’s *Collected Stories*, vol. 1, ed. Amrita Bhalla (New Delhi: Penguin India, 2003), are in this sense exemplary.


32 It is curious that none of the early reviews of the novel, to my knowledge, pick up on the problematic semiotics of the veiled woman who is helped by a westerner because she has set herself alight. For Elaine Showalter, *London Review of Books*, 24.13 (July 2002), 13, this 'political twist does not displace the fundamental debates about women's art and its reception'. Rachel Cusk, *The New Statesman*, 131.4585 (29 April 2002), 47, hints that Reta's 'surrender' to family can be viewed metaphorically as an act of self-immolation. In both cases the Third World woman implicitly becomes a vehicle to represent the condition of the western woman. On the veil, see Alison Donnell (ed.), *Interventions, Special Topic, The Veil: Postcolonialism and the Politics of Dress*, 1:4 (1999).

33 See Gayatri Spivak's discussion, crucial in this context, of the 'sati' as object of

35 Yelin, *From the Margins of Empire*, p. 7.